Frame Lock
Charles Bernstein

http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/essays/frame-lock.html
Published in My Way: Speeches and Poems. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1999.

Lost Wages, Nev., Nov. 13 - Riddick Bowe, the 25-year-old challenger from Brooklyn outgunned Evander Holyfield through 12 gritty rounds to win the undisputed world heavyweight title... Afterward, when the decision was announced, a weary Holyfield was asked whether he wanted a rematch. "No," he said, "I think I'm finished." - The New York Times

A specter is haunting the literary academy: the growing discrepancy between our most advanced theories and institutionally encoded proscriptions on our writing and teaching practices.

I diagnose the problem as "frame lock", a kind of logorrheic lock jaw, or sandy mouth, or bullet-with-the-baby-not-just-quite-then-almost-out-of-reach, as a mood swinging under a noose of monomaniacal monotones, the converted preaching to the incontrovertible, the guard rail replacing the banisters, stairs, stories, elevation, detonation, reverberation, indecision, concomitant intensification system.

Frame lock, and its cousin tone jam, are the prevailing stylistic constraints of the sanctioned prose of the profession. No matter that the content of an essay may interrogate the constructed unity of a literary work or a putative period; may dwell on linguistic fragmentation, demolition, contradiction, contestation, inter-eruption; may decry assumptions of totality, continuity, narrative progression, teleology, or truth and may insist that meaning is plural, polygamous, profligate, uncontainable, rhetorical, slippery or sliding or gliding or giddy and prurient. The keepers of the scholarly flame, a touch passed hand to hand and fist to mouth by generations of professional standard bearers and girdle makers, search committees and admissions officers, editors and publishers, maintain, against all comers, that the argument for this or that or the other must maintain appropriate scholarly decorum.

Theory enacted into writing practice is suspect, demeaned as unprofessional. But that is because theory so enacted ceases to be theory - a body of doctrine - insofar as it threatens with poetry or philosophy. Theory, prophylacticly wrapped in normalizing prose styles, is protected from the scourge of writing and thinking as active, open-ended, and investigatory. The repression of writing styles in the literary academy is enforced by the collusion of scholars, theorists, administrators and editors across the spectrum of periods and methodologies. PMLA would prefer to publish poets writing in the patrician rhetoric of the nineteenth century about the exhaustion of poetry than to permit actual poetic acts to violate its pages. While many of the most innovative of the profession's theorists and scholars sit on the board of PMLA, the publication persists in its systematic process of enforcing mood and style control on all its articles and letters, as if tone or mood were unrelated to argument and meaning. Difference and otherness: these values ring hollow if they are not applied, also, to our own productions and articulations. If PMLA - a no doubt easy but nonetheless representatively obtrusive target - is strictly whitebread, the radical claims for diversity made within its pages seem stifled or neutered.

Professionalism and career advancement are the bogeymen of frame lock. Dissertations must not violate stylistic norms because that might jeopardize our young scholar's future. "Let them be radical in what they say but not in how they say it." - Such is the pragmatic, and characteristically self-fulfilling, argument that is made. The point here, as in most initiation rites, is to be hazed into submission, to break the spirit, and to justify the past practice of the initiators. Professionalization is the criteria of professional standing but not necessary professional values; nor are our professional writing standards at

or near the limits of coherence, perception, edification, scholarship, communication, or meaning. Underneath the mask of career-minded concessions to normalcy is an often repressed epistemological positivism about the representation of ideas. While the philosophical and linguistic justifications for such ideational mimesis - for example the idea that a writing style can be transparent or neutral - have been largely undermined, the practice of ideational mimesis is largely unacknowledged and, as a result, persists unabated.

In order to explore unsanctioned forms of scholarly and critical writing, graduate students and new faculty need to be protected against the arbitrary enforcement of antiquated stylistic constraints. Yet even those in the profession who are sympathetic to these new - and indeed not-at-all new - writing forms may believe that one's initial professional work should be stylistically orthodox, with innovations considered only in later work. This argument is akin to the idea that art students should first learn anatomy and figure drawing before they embark on more expressionist or abstract work. As a generalization, there is no merit to this argument (while of course specific individuals may benefit from different experiences). Younger scholars and critics are most likely to bring energy and enthusiasm to their writing, to open up new paths, to push the boundaries of the possible; once channelled into frame lock, more often than not they get stuck in its claustrophobic confines. And young scholars who are not supported for taking new directions often drop out, or are forced out, of the profession: a loss of talent that our universities cannot afford.

It is no secret that universities reward conformism and conventionality under the name of both professionalization and currency. We see all around us dress and decorum advisories for job interviews such as those this week at the MLA: as if dressing the same as every one else - any more than writing the same or citing the same 17 major theorists or authors as everyone else - makes you a better researcher or cultural interpreter. Indeed, there is no evidence to show that tone-lock, any more than interview dress codes, make better teachers, or more committed or knowledgeable scholars; on the contrary, there is plenty of reason to believe this sort of career-oriented behavior, exacerbated by the present scarcity of jobs, breeds a professional cynicism that is disastrous for the infectious enthusiasm and performative limberness that are crucial components for teaching. The forms we enforce among ourselves serve not the content of our work but the perpetuation of our administrative apparatuses.

*

Frame lock is a term I base on Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis. As applied to prose, it can generally be characterized as an insistence on a univocal surface, minimal shifts of mood either within paragraphs or between paragraphs, exclusion of extraneous or contradictory material, and tone restricted to the narrow affective envelope of sobriety, neutrality, objectivity, authoritativeness, or deanimated abstraction. In frame-locked prose, the order of sentences and paragraphs is hypotactic, based on a clear subordination of elements to an overriding argument that is made in a narrative or expository or linear fashion. In what might be called the rule of the necessity of paraphrase, the argument must be separable from its expression, so that a defined message can be extracted from the text. To this end, arguments must be readily glossable and indeed periodically reiterated self-glosses are used as markers to enforce interpretative closure.

With the proliferation of frames of interpretation over the past fifteen years, a menu of methodological choices is available to the young scholar. In a campus version of the dating game, our initiate may attend a series of seminars, each promising the satisfactions of its newly rejuvenated, comprehensively restyled, and radically overhauled approach. One frame of interpretation beckons with its production of detail and cultural difference, another allures with its astounding solutions, while the sociality of a third seems magnetic; in contrast, the social responsibility of a fourth is compelling, while the ultimate

sophistication of a fifth is irresistible. Finally, uber alles, the retro chic of rejecting any and all the new frames of interpretation is always in style, always a good career move - and the fast track for getting quoted in national media.

After a period of flirtation with several of these approaches, our neophyte (the neophyte within each of us) makes a commitment to one primary frame. The marriage is consummated in the act of being announced.

Of course a newly chosen frame of interpretation may replace an older one; indeed divorce and remarriage are as inevitable as new consumers in a market economy. Serial monogamy is typical, as long as the series doesn't get very long; breaking frame is suspect. For the crucial ingredient of frame lock is consistency, sticking to one frame at a time. When flames are jumped, the new frame must appear to replace the old, which is best publicly stigmatized as damaged goods, so much youthful idealism or false consciousness or lack of rigor. This is called keeping up or advancing with the field.

If I exaggerate, and my commitment to exaggeration is second to none, even I was surprised to get a couple of examination copies in the mail this past month from Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press that seemed to parody beyond my powers the problem of rigid segmentation of frames of interpretation. In what could easily be called The Frame Lock Series of Target Texts, we have the complete, authorized, unabridged version of Polish immigrant Joey-Joey-Joey Conrad's brooding Heart of Darkness, in what might as well have been six-point type, an almost expendable pretext to a half-dozen large-type chapters offering a menu of interpretative modes - reader-response, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, new historical, historical materialist, and feminist. Each critical section starts with a ten-page gloss of the theoretical approach, written in clear unambiguous prose, studded with quotations from well-known practitioners of the theory: just enough lucid explanation to make a travesty of each of these methods, stripped as they are of their context, necessity, and complexity. Appended to this are ten pages applying the now-manageable theory to the pretext, the absent center that is so aptly named Heart of Darkness in this case.

Most scholars resist such compartmentalization, such marriages of convenience, despite the professional pressures that push them into them. But our profession too rarely addresses the conflict between inquiry and job-search marketing in which one's work is supposed to be easily summed up, definable, packaged, polished, wrinkles and contradictions eliminated, digressions booted. Insofar as we make hiring decisions using these criteria, insofar as we train graduate students to conform to such market imperatives, insofar as we present our own writing and scholarship and evaluate each other's along these lines, then the demands of our work - teaching, research, encouraging creativity - will be severely compromised. Professionalization need not be antithetical to our work as educators and writers and searchers, but in itself professionalization offers no protection against the emptying of values many of us would espouse for our work.

*

Goffman's analysis of frames is valuable for understanding the institutional nature of all forms of communication. In particular, frame analysis can help elucidate disputes over the curriculum in terms of both interdisciplinarity and core (or required) courses.

By their nature, frames focus attention on a particular set of features at the same time as they divert attention from other features that Goffman locates in the "disattend track". A traditional, or frame-locked, curriculum is designed so that each of its elements fits within a single overall scheme. Like the fourth wall in an old-fashioned play, the curricular frame is neither questioned nor broken. Even as

curricular content (the canon) is challenged and reconstituted, the new material tends to be reframed within revised disciplinary boundaries. In contrast, anti-lock syllabi emphasize a performative and interdisciplinary approach that may undercut the passive learning patterns that currently cripple many of our educational efforts.

The process of locating disattend tracks, and bringing them to the center of attention, can be understood as not only a primary pedagogical aim but also a central project of much modernist and contemporary art. Within text-bound literary studies, the disattend track may include such features as the visual representation of the language as well as its acoustic structure. Moreover, a work may best be discussed within a context that not only includes its historical or ideological context, but also its interdependence on contemporary painting, theater, or music, not to mention the "popular" arts of the period. The idea that works of literature can be studied in isolation from the other arts, a founding idea of the discipline of English literary studies, may simply be mistaken. Certainly, the very limited aesthetic consciousness of college graduates would support the proposition that current approaches are misguided. Basic remodeling is necessary.

Not only our subjects, but also our methods, need to be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective. In much of the discourse coming out of English departments, the art of writing has been relegated to the disattend track. To insist on the art of writing is, ironically, to press the need for interdisciplinarity within a field bisected against itself. To call for greater interaction between literary studies and the literary arts is to call literary studies back to itself.

My idea of a core curriculum will seem perverse to many advocates of both traditional and progressive approaches. My commitment to difference is not satisfied only by differences of "subject positions". To be sure, a course of differences must include a broad range of subject positions (including ones not easily definable by prevailing categories) but, to avoid frame lock, it also needs to include radical differences in forms, styles and genres of expression and nonexpression. Insofar as narratives of personal or group experience are given primacy over other formal and aesthetic modalities, difference is not only enriched but also suppressed.

My modest proposal no doubt hopelessly complicates an already difficult task because it places virtually no limits on the number or types of possible works that might be studied. I find this a more stimulating starting point than determining a convenient frame that makes the task easier and more rationalizable. For example, I find myself surprisingly impatient with the obviously well-intentioned idea that an English department should require its undergraduate majors to take survey courses that cover canonically and historically significant (though previously underrepresented) works of English literature, along with a companion course in major trends in literary theory. In many such curricular proposals, and in the related "multicultural" anthologies published in recent years, the choice of literary authors is made with a commitment to diversity in mind. In contrast, there is rarely a similar commitment to diversity among the authors to be studied in theoretical and methodological courses. Furthermore, the new literature curriculums and anthologies are generally restricted to English language works, while it is hard to imagine a comparable anthology or core course in literary theory restricted only to works written in English. A number of problematic assumptions are at work here. In the first place, there is the idea that theory is a quasi-scientific form of knowledge that is able to transcend - largely, if not totally - its particular subject positions, and, as a result, is not dependent for its value on the fact that it represents a particular subject position. The corollary to this is that literary works do have their value in representing subject positions, and, as a result, are infinitely substitutable: in effect literature becomes a series of possible examples, any one of which is expendable. The problem is analogous to the disturbing practice of universities doing all their affirmative action hiring in the

infinitely elastic or "soft" humanities rather than doing such hiring equally in the "uncompromisable" social and natural sciences.

What is English? While poetry may be said to be untranslatable in a way that philosophical works are not, philosophy also may be untranslatable in certain ways. Or rather, some philosophy (call it theory) and some literature (call it sociological) pose few translation problems. In this respect, it is revealing that some of the new anthologies that purport to represent cultural diversity - The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and The Heath Anthology of American Literature, edited by Paul Lauter, are the most prominent - emphasize contemporary poetry written in a single-voice confessional mode that already seems to have been translated into the prevailing idiom of the anthologies themselves. This stylistic discrimination entails the rejection of works that challenge the idea that English is a transparent medium that can represent cultural experience as if it were information (already had a form). The result is that both formally innovative work and work in nonstandard forms of English are marginalized.

I could go on.

Can Continental philosophy be understood in the absence of Continental literature? Or does Continental philosophy without Continental literature equal American literary theory?

Disciplinary boundaries serve more to cordon off areas of knowledge than to encourage students to search through a wide range of historical writers and thinkers and art practices. I would like to see the direction of undergraduate English programs in American universities move expansively toward the world rather than more parochially toward the literature of England and its linguistic heirs. While I suppose one could argue that people in the U.S. might have a special reason to know about the history and literature of the U.S. (though possibly North America would be the better frame), I can't see giving priority to the literature of England as opposed to the literature of the other European countries - or indeed other places in the world. English majors usually major in English not because of special interest in England but because of a more general interest in literature, writing, art, the humanities, or the history of ideas. English is the host language of their study. It's not as if students are likely to study Li Po or Soupault elsewhere in their studies - much less the Popul Vuh or Sapho. And, if that's so, it's hard to see how the line can be usefully drawn without including the "other" arts, and works from cultures that do not identify their cultural productions by proper names. Jerome Rothenberg's and Pierre Joris's forthcoming Poems for the Millenium: The University of California Book of Modern Poetry goes a long way toward redressing this problem.

*

But I digress. I came here to talk paragraphs.

*

I like the idea of a paragraph developing its own internal logic, pushing a stretch of thought, turning around a term, considering a particular angle on a problem.

But it's the shift from paragraph to paragraph that creates the momentum, with the jump varying from almost indiscernible to a leap. My method of teaching, as much as writing, is to place one thing side by side with another and another, so that the series creates multiple perspectives on the issues addressed.

But what is the conclusion? What knowledge is gained? What has been taught or demonstrated? - Performance has no value, no substance. You want a theater of ideas but no knowledge. - As if the process of critical thinking needed an end to justify it.

Then why does poetry have its music, fiction its stories, essays their ideas?

*

- But aren't you conflating literary and academic writing? -Possibly. Not necessarily. Not at all. Why are you bothering me? Can't you understand what I'm saying? I don't like to be spoken to in that manner. I think I deserve an apology, an ontology, a spin doctor, a value-added package with no financing, a one-way ticket to the next oceanliner, a way out of this pleated bag, container, vehicle, conveyor, storage bin, basement franchise.

Well, only if you say so, then maybe I'd agree.

What is wrong with you! Would you go and wash your hands they're full of chocolate!

Oh, excuse me. I don't know how that got in here, I guess I've never installed the right import protection system on my digital alphabet generator. Can I recommend a few inexpensive, but fairly decent, restaurants in the neighborhood of the hotel? I particularly like the small satellite cafe in the atrium on 53rd just west of Sixth.

*

I've only just begun to contradict myself. But I contain no multitudes; I can't even contain myself.

Nor am I interested in proving anything. - Except to you, sir: to you I want to prove a thing or two, I'll tell you that. About that job opening ... Can we meet me in the lounge right after the session?

*

It is my great pleasure to recommend V.S.O.P. for the position available at your university. V.S.O.P. is one of the most extraordinary scholars at the university and I am convinced that her work will become fundamental for future scholarship. I strongly recommend V.S.O.P. for advancement in the field. I can think of no young scholar that I could recommend to you more heartily.

*

Is that any worse than the way you conflate philosophy and what you like to call theory, or criticism and sociology, or interpretation and psychoanalysis? And anyway what is the natural form of scholarly writing? Where do our present standards come from? What values do they propagate? What and who do they exclude? What kinds of teaching and research do they foster, what discourage?

If some of the more interrogatory directions in literary studies, following almost a century of artistic practice, suggest we need to break down the distinction between high art and the rest of culture in order to investigate the interdependence of all cultural production, then it should come as less a surprise than it evidently does that the distinction between research and the thing researched will also break down. Erosion goes in both directions, or all three, since we don't want to forget about Aunt Rosie and the

Babysitter's Club. Signifying is as signifying does. To assume a form of writing is to make it always and forever a cultural artifact.

*

Am I just complaining about being bored by certain prose styles, rendered without the panache needed to give them the intensity they sometimes possess? In any case, I'm not trying to exclude any of the styles of writing now practiced in the university, but to ask why we limit it to that. And if that should change, my questioning would find new targets. Questioning is its own reward. Frame-locked prose seems to deny its questions, its contradictions, its exhilarations, its comedy, its groping.

I find it more interesting to teach a class, or write an essay, on something I don't understand than to represent in a class or essay that which I already seem to have understood at some time previous.

*

I do not propose alternating between two subjects or two frames: that merely multiplies what is a problem in the first instance. I am suggesting a potentially endless series that does not systematically return to the point of its comparison, a parade of blackout sketches on Freud's mystic writing pad, whose origin is in departure, whose destination is in going on.

One thing I want to break down is the virtually Kantian picture of the studier and the thing studied. Serial composition, one paragraph adjacent to the next, one topic followed by another, one perspective permuted with another, refuses the idea that the studied and the studier are separable. Next to us is not the work that we study, which we love so well to explain, but the work we are. I unclothe myself in addressing a poem, and the poem returns to show me my bearings, my comportment, and the way to read the next poem or painting, person or situation.

*

I am as low and befuddled as any man, as fouled and out of touch and self-deluded; this is what gives me a place from which to speak.

*

Is criticism condemned to be 50 years behind the arts? Is the art of today the model for the cultural studies of the next century? Will you be content to produce artifacts already inscribed in a dimming past, quaint lore for future researchers of institutional mores to mull on? Or will you make the culture you desire?

It's worth repeating: signifying practices have only art from which to copy.

*

-- Oh, no, not art! I thought art was finished, over, done. I mean after Burger and Danto and Jameson and Bourdieu and all those anthologies of cultural and new historical studies! I mean after the Yale School took Keats out on a TKO, art's never even had a strong contender.

-- Charlie, Charlie, Charlie it was you. I could have been a contender, I could have been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it.

-- Art, she's not finished. I can hear her in the very halls we are congregating in today. She's saying: Just give me one more chance in the ring.

Presented on December 29, 1992, at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association as part of a panel on "Framing the Frame: Theory and Practice". Published in College Literature 21.2, June (1994) and posted with the permission of the editor, Jerry McGuire. Subsequently published in My Way: Speeches and Poems (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word
Charles Bernstein
http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/essays/close-listening.html

[This essay was written as the introduction to Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and collected in My Way: Speeches and Poems (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).]

I sing and I play the flute for myself.
For no man except me understands my language.
As little as they understand the nightingale
do the people understand what my song says.
– Peire Cardenal

No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
Or crash of water. It means
Nothing.
– Jack Spicer [*]

While the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry performance has been negligible, despite the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century. The subject is wide-ranging and requires a range of approaches. At one end of the spectrum would be philosophical and critical approaches to the contribution of sound to meaning: the way poets, and especially twentieth century innovative poets, work with sound as material, where sound is neither arbitrary nor secondary but constitutive. At the other end of the spectrum would be critical interpretations of the performance style of individual poets. Such approaches may well encourage "close listenings" not only to the printed text of poems, but also to tapes and performances.

Close listenings may contradict "readings" of poems that are based exclusively on the printed text and that ignore the poet's own performances, the "total" sound of the work, and the relation of sound to semantics. Certainly, discussion of sound as a material and materializing dimension of poetry also calls into play such developments as sound poetry, performance poetry, radio plays and radio "space," movie soundtracks, poetry/music collaborations, and other audioworks. Beyond that, "close listenings" call for a non-Euclidean (or complex) prosody for the many poems for which traditional prosody does not apply.

Since the 1950s, the poetry reading has become one of the most important sites for the dissemination of poetic works in North America, yet studies of the distinctive features of the poem-in-performance have been rare (even full-length studies of a poet's work routinely ignore the audiotext), and readings – no matter how well attended – are never reviewed by newspapers or magazines (though they are the frequent subject of light, generally misinformed, "feature" stories on the perennial "revival" of poetry).[1] A large archive of audio and video documents, dating back to an early recording of Tennyson's almost inaudible voice, awaits serious study and interpretation. The absence of such a history has had the effect of eliding the significance of the modernist poetry traditions for postwar performance art. At the same time, the performative dimension of poetry has significant relation to text-based visual and conceptual art, as well as visual poetry, which extend the performative (and material) dimension of the literary text into visual space.

The newly emerging field of performance studies and theory provides a useful context for this study. By considering examples of "total" performances in other cultures, performance theorists have reoriented the discussion of the relation of theater, audience, and text. While much of the discussion of postmodern performance art has been focused on this and related contexts, there has been considerably less focus on the implications for poetry performance. Particularly helpful for "close listening" is Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis, especially his conception of how the cued frame through which a situation (or work) is viewed necessarily puts other features out of frame, into what he calls the "disattend track." Focusing attention on a poem's content or form typically involves putting the audiotext as well as the typography – the sound and look – of the poem, into the disattend track. Indeed, the drift of much literary criticism of the two decades has been away from the auditory and performative aspects of the poem, partly because of the prevalent notion that the sound structure of language is relatively arbitrary. Such elements as the visual appearance of the text or the sound of the work in performance may be extralexical but they are not extrasemantic. When textual elements that are conventionally framed out as nonsemantic are acknowledged as significant, the result is a proliferation of possible frames of interpretation. Then it becomes a question of whether we see these frames or strata as commensurate with each other, leading to a "total image complex" of the poem, to use Veronica Forrest-Thomson's term; or whether we see these strata as incommensurate with each other, contradictory, leading to a reading of the poem as untotalizable. Here "strata" might usefully be thought of also as the kind of layers, one finds in a palimpsest.

In a sense, the Close Listening collection emerged as a complex, multilayered response to a quite simple, and common, response to a poetry reading, as when one says: "I understand the work better hearing the poet read it. I would never have been able to figure out that the poems would sound that way." (This is not to discount the significance of performances by poets that seem "bad" for one reason or another or may make one like the work less than on the page, nor to distract from the significance of the performance of a poem by someone other than its author.) Insofar as poetry performance is countenanced as a topic of discussion, the subject is often assumed to be exemplified by such high-octane examples as Vachel Lindsay's notorious "Congo" ("MUMBO JUMBO in the CONNNG-GO"), or Carl Sandburg's melodramatic presentation style ("in the tooooombs, the coooool tooooooombs"), or Allen Ginsberg's near-chanting of "Howl", or more recently the "rap", "slam", and "scratch" poetry. But the unanticipatably slow tempo of Wallace Stevens's performance tells us much about his sense of the poem's rhythms and philosophical sensuousness, just as John Ashbery's near monotone suggests a dreamier dimension than the text sometimes reveals. The intense emotional impact of Robert Creeley's pauses at line breaks gives an affective interpretation to what otherwise reads as a highly formal sense of fragmented line breaks – the breaks suggest emotional pitch and distress in a way audible in the recordings but not necessarily on the page. The recordings of Gertrude Stein make clear both the bell-like resonance of her voice and her sense of shifting rhythms against modulating repetitions and the shapeliness of her sound-sense; while hearing Langston Hughes one immediately picks up not only on the specific blues echoes in the work but how he modulated shifts into and out of these rhythms. Having heard these poets read, we change our hearing and reading of their works on the page as well.

No doubt, there are a number of factors that are involved in the dramatically increased significance of the poetry reading in the postwar period in North American and the United Kingdom. At the outset, though, let me put forward one explanation. During the past forty years, more and more poets have used forms whose sound patterns are made up – that is, their poems do not follow received or prefabricated forms. It is for these poets that the poetry reading has taken on so much significance. For the sound shapes of the poems of such practitioners are often most immediately and viscerally heard in performance (taped or live), even if the attuned reader might be able to hear something comparable in her or his own (prior) reading of the text. The poetry reading is a public tuning. (Think of how public readings in the 1950s by Creeley, Ginsberg, Olson, and Jack Kerouac established – in a primary way –

not only the sound of their work but also the possibilities for related work. Bob Perelman's discussion of the poet's talk explores more recent versions of a practice largely established by these poets.) The proliferation of poetry readings has allowed a spinning out into the world of a new series of acoustic modalities, which have had an enormous impact in informing the reading of contemporary poetry. These performances set up new conventions that are internalized and applied to further reading of the poetic texts. They are the acoustic grounding of innovative practice – our collective sounding board.

To be heard, poetry needs to be sounded – whether in a process of active, or interactive, reading of a work or by the poet in performance. Unsounded poetry remains inert marks on a page, waiting to be able to be called into use by saying, or hearing, the words aloud. The poetry reading provides a focal point for this process in that its existence is uniquely tied to the reading aloud of the text; it is an emblem of the necessity for such reading out loud and in public. Nor is the process of transforming soundless words on a page into performed language unique to the poetry reading. To give just one example, Jerome Rothenberg points to the ancient Jewish tradition of reading and incanting the Torah – turning a script without vowels into a fully voiced sounding. [2] Public recitation also brings to mind a number of sermonic traditions, from subdued preachment to Gospel call-and-response. And if the poetry reading provides unscripted elements for the performer, it also provides special possibilities for the listener, from direct response to the work, ranging from laughter to derision; to the pleasure of getting lost in language that surges forward, allowing the mind to wander in the presence of words.

When the audiotape archive of a poet's performance is acknowledged as a significant, rather than incidental, part of her or his work, a number of important textual and critical issues emerge. What is the status of discrepancies among performed and published versions of poems, and, moreover, between interpretations based on the text versus interpretations based on the performance? Amiri Baraka is one of the most dynamic poetry performers of the postwar period. For Baraka, making the words dance in performance means taking the poems off the page, out of the realm of ideas, and into action. In some of Baraka's most vibrantly performed poems, such as "Afro-American Lyric," the text can seem secondary, as if, as William Harris seems to suggest in his discussion of the poem, the text – with its inventive typography – has become merely a score for the performance.[3] Surely, it is always possible for some poems to seem thinner on the page than in performance, and vice versa. But I don't think this is the case for Baraka, whose work is always exploring the dialectic of performance and text, theory and practice, the literary and the oral – a dialectic that will involve clashes more than harmony. Performance, in the sense of doing, is an underlying formal aesthetic as much as it is a political issue in Baraka's work. [4] The shape of his performances are iconic – they signify. In this sense the printed text of "Afro-American Lyric" works to spur the (silent, atomized) reader into performance – it insists on action; the page's apparent textual "lack" is the motor of its form.

The text of "Afro-American Lyric" brings to mind the language of Marxist political pamphlets, foregrounding the poem's untransformed didacticism. Hearing Baraka read this poem on a tape of his July 26, 1978 performance at the Naropa Institute, however, gives a distinctly different impression. Baraka sounds the syllables of "simple shit" ("Seeeeeeeeeee-immmmmmmmmm pull" in the text), interweaving and syncopating them with "exploiting class, owning class, bourgeois class, reactionary class," turning the text's diatribe into a cross between a sound poem and a scat jazz improvisation. He makes playful yet dissonant music from the apparently refractory words of Marxist analysis, bringing out the uncontained phonic plenitude inside and between the words. This is no mere embellishment of the poem but a restaging of its meaning ("Class Struggle in Music", as Baraka titles a later poem). Baraka's recitations invoke a range of performance rhetorics from hortatory to accusatory: typically, he will segue from his own intoning of a song tune to a more neutrally inflected phrase, then plunge into a percussively grating sound.

What's the relation of Baraka's performance – or of any poem performed by its author – to the original text? I want to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the "poem itself." In the conventional view, recitation has something of the status of interpretation – it provides a possible gloss of the immutable original. One problem with this perspective, most persuasively argued by Jerome McGann in Black Riders, The Textual Condition, and A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism, is that there is often no one original written version of a poem. Even leaving aside the status of the manuscript, there often exist various and discrepant printings – I should like to say textual performances – in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also spacing, font, paper and, moreover, contexts of readership; making for a plurality of versions none of which can claim sole authority. I would call these multifoliate versions performances of the poem; and I would add the poet's own performance of the work in a poetry reading, or readings, to the list of variants that together, plurally, constitute and reconstitute the work. This, then, is clearly not to say that all performances of a poem have equal authority. An actor's rendition, like a type designer's "original" setting of a classic, will not have the same kind of authority as a poet's own reading or the first printing of the work. But the performance of the poet, just as the visualization of the poem in its initial printings, forever marks the poem's entry into the world; and not only its meaning, its existence.

A poem understood as a performative event and not merely as a textual entity refuses the originality of the written document in favor of "the plural event" of the work, to use a phrase of Andrew Benjamin's. That is, the work is not identical to any one graphical or performative realization of it, nor can it be equated with a totalized unity of these versions or manifestations. The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence. This is most dramatically enunciated when instances of the work are contradictory or incommensurable, but it is also the case when versions are commensurate. To speak of the poem in performance is, then, to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object; it is to deny the poem its self-presence and its unity. Thus, while performance emphasizes the material presence of the poem, and of the performer, it at the same time denies the unitary presence of the poem, which is to say its metaphysical unity.

Indulge me now as I translate some remarks by Benjamin on psychoanalysis and translation into the topic at hand:

The question of presence, the plurality within being present, is of fundamental significance for poetry. The presence of the text (the written document) within the performance but equally the presence of the performance inside the text means that there are, at any one moment in time, two irreducible modes of being present. As presence becomes the site of irreducibility, this will mean that presence can no longer be absolutely present to itself. The anoriginal marks the possibility of the poem being either potentially or actually plural, which will mean that the poem will always lack an essential unity. (Within the context of poetry, what could be said to be lacking is an already given semantic and interpretive finitude, if not singularity, of the poem.) It is thus that there is no unity to be recovered, no task of thinking of the origin as such, since the origin, now the anorigin, is already that which resists the move to a synthetic unity. Any unity will be an after-effect. Such after-effects are comprised of given publications, performances, interpretations, or readings. The poem – that which is anoriginally plural – cannot be known as such because it cannot exist as such.[5]

The relation of a poem to variations created in a poetry reading has not, so far as I know, received previous attention. Variations created in performing "oral" poetry is, however, a subject of Gregory Nagy's Poetry and Performance, where, speaking of both the Homeric epics and troubadour poetry, Nagy writes, "to perform the song … is to recompose it, to change it, to move it." [6] Indeed, Nagy's

"poetics of variation" is suggested by two variant epithets for the nightingale in The Odyssey – where the nightingale can be understood as a metaphor for the performer of poetry: "patterning many different ways" (49-50) and also "with many resoundings" (39). Nagy quotes Alfred Lord's study of Homer, The Singer of Tales:

> Our real difficulty arises from the fact that, unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity. We find it difficult to grasp something that is multiform. It seems ideal to us to construct an ideal text or to seek an original, and we remain dissatisfied with an ever-changing phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease to find an original of any traditional song. From an oral point of view each performance is original. [7]

The poetry reading, considered along with typographic, holographic, and contextual variants, modulates and deepens what McGann calls the "textual condition." The poetry reading extends the patterning of poetry into another dimension, adding another semantic layer to the poem's multiformity. The effect is to create a space of authorial resistance to textual authority. For while writing is normally –if reductively and counterproductively [8] – viewed as stabilizing and fixing oral poetic traditions, authorial poetry readings are best understood as destabilizing, by making more fluid and pluriform, an aural (post-written) poetic practice. And here the double sense of reading is acutely relevant. For in realizing, by supplementing, the semantic possibilities of the poem in a reading, the poet encourages readers to perform the poem on their own, a performance that is allowed greater latitude depending on how reading-centered the poem is – that is, how much the poem allows for the active participation of the reader (in both senses) in the constitution of the poem's meaning.

I am proposing that we look at the poetry reading not as a secondary extension of "prior" written texts but as its own medium. What, then, are the characteristics specific to this medium and what can it do that other live performance media – instrumental music, song and opera, theater – cannot? The answer may be found in what seems to many the profoundly anti-performative nature of the poetry reading: the poetry reading as radically "poor theater" in Jerzy Grotowski's sense. If that is true, it may show how what some find as the most problematic aspect of the poetry reading may turn out to be its essence: that is, its lack of spectacle, drama, and dynamic range, as exemplified especially in a certain minimal – anti-expressivist – mode of reading. I'm tempted to label this mode anti-performative to suggest a kind of rhetorical (in the stylisitc sense of "antirhetorical") strategy and not to suggest it is any less a performance choice than the most "theatrical" reading. (John Cage's poetry readings are a good example of this mode.) In an age of spectacle and high drama, the anti-expressivist poetry reading stands out as an oasis of low technology that is among the least spectaclized events in our public culture. Explicit value is placed almost exclusively on the acoustic production of a single unaccompanied speaking voice, with all other theatrical elements being placed, in most cases, out of frame. The solo voice so starkly framed can come to seem virtually disembodied in an uncanny, even hypnotic, way. Such poetry readings share the intimacy of radio or of small ensemble or chamber music. In contrast to theater, where the visual spectacle creates a perceived distance separating viewers from viewed, the emphasis on sound in the poetry reading has the opposite effect – it physically connects the speaker and listener, moving to overcome the self-consciousness of the performance context. Indeed, the anti-expressivist mode of reading works to defeat the theatricality of the performance situation, to allow the listener to enter into a concave acoustic space rather than be pushed back from it, as in a more propulsive reading mode (which creates a convex acoustic space). When a poem has an auditory rather than a visual source (the heard performance rather than the read text), our perspective on, or of, the work shifts. Rather than looking at the poem – at the words on a page – we may enter into it, perhaps to get lost, perhaps to lose ourselves, our (nonmetrical) "footing" with one another. According to Charles Lock, "the absence or presence of perspective marks the crucial difference between 'pictorial' and 'symbolic' signs, both of

which are 'visual.'"[9] For a text is the only visual sign system that, as Lock puts it, is "entirely free of perspective" (418). Like a text, auditory phenomena do not permit perspective but they do have an auditory version of perspective, location, and that is a constitutive element of the medium of the poetry reading.

This formalist approach to the poetry reading may explain the common dislike, among poets, of actors' reading of poems; for this registers not a dislike of vocalization but of a style of acting that frames the performance in terms of character, personality, setting, gesture, development, or drama, even though these may be extrinsic to the text at hand. That is, the "acting" takes precedence over letting the words speak for themselves (or worse eloquence compromises, not to say eclipses, the ragged music of the poem). The project of the poetry reading, from this formalist perspective, is to find the sound in the words, not in any extrinsic scenario or supplemental accompaniment. Without in any way wishing to undermine the more extravagantly theatrical style of reading, I would point to this more monovalent, minimally inflected, and in any case unaugmented, mode as touching on the essence of the medium. For poetry cannot, and need not, compete with music in terms of acoustic complexity or rhythmic force, or with theater in terms of spectacle. What is unique, and in its own way exhilarating, about the performance of poetry is that it does what it does within the limits of language alone.

(Let me note here Peter Quartermain's caution, in Close Listening, that the poet's voicing of a poem should not be allowed to eliminate ambiguous voicings in the text; nor should the author's performance of a poem be absolutely privileged over that of other readers and performers.)

The (unaccompanied) performance of poetry has as its upper limit music, as realized in what has come to be called sound poetry, and its lower limit silence, as realized in what has come to be called visual poetry. Visual poetry gets us to look at works as well as read them, while sound poetry gets us to hear as well as listen. Curiously, these two limits intersect, as when a visual poem is performed as a sound poem or a sound poem is scored as a visual poem. It's important, however, to stay focussed on the poetry reading in the ordinary sense, since it seems to me that this mode of reading is most critically neglected – or perhaps just taken for granted, if not derided. Even those sympathetic to performed poetry will remark that most poets can't read their work, as if such a sentiment suggests a defect with the medium of poetry readings. One might say that most of the poems published in books or magazines are dull without that observation reflecting on poetry as a medium. Perhaps it makes most sense to say that if you don't like a poet's reading it is because you don't like the poetry, to pick up on an observation of Aldon Nielsen on a recent internet discussion list. There are no poets whose work I admire whose readings have failed to engage me, to enrich my hearing of the work. That is not to say, however, that some readings don't trouble or complicate my understanding or appreciation. For related reasons, I am quite interested in audio recording of poetry readings. If, as I am suggesting, poetry readings foreground the audible acoustic text of the poem – what I want to call the audiotext of the poem, specifically extending Garrett Stewart's term phonotext – then audio reproduction is ideally suited to the medium. (Video, it seems to me, is often less engaging for poetry, since the typically depleted visual resources – static shots of a person at a podium – are no match for the sound track and tend to flatten out the affective dimension of the live performance. For me, the most energetic and formally engaging cinematic extension of the poetry reading are a series of films made from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s by Henry Hills, especially Plagiarism, Radio Adios, and Money.)

What is the relation of sound to meaning? Any consideration of the poetry reading must give special significance to this question since poetry readings are acoustic performances that foreground the audiotext of the poem. One way of approaching this issue is to emphasize the oral dimension of poetry, the origins of the sounds of language in speech. And of course many poets do wish to identify their performance with just such an orality, even to the extent of stressing a "return" to a more "vital" cultural

past, before the advent of writing. But I am interested in a broader range of performance practice than is suggested by orality; in fact, some of the most interesting poetry reading styles – from Jackson Mac Low to Stein to T. S. Eliot – defy orality in very specific ways: Eliot through his eerily depersonalized vocal style (emanating from the mouth more than the diaphragm); Stein with her all-over, modulating or cubist, resonances; and Mac Low with his immaculate enunciation of constructed word patterns. Orality can be understood as a stylistic or even ideological marker of a reading style; in contrast, the audiotext might more usefully be understood as aural – what the ear hears. By aurality I mean to emphasize the sounding of the writing, and to make a sharp contrast with orality and its emphasis on breath, voice, and speech – an emphasis that tends to valorize speech over writing, voice over sound, listening over hearing, and indeed, orality over aurality. Aurality precedes orality, just as language precedes speech. Aurality is connected to the body – what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact – not the presence of the poet; it is proprioceptive in Charles Olson's sense. The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work, not the one who composed it. In short, the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem. My insistence on aurality is not intended to valorize the material ear over the metaphysical mouth but to find a term that averts the identification of orality with speech. Aurality is meant to invoke a performative sense of "phonotext" or audiotext and might better be spelled a/orality.

The audiotext, in the sense of the poet's acoustic performance, is a semantically denser field of linguistic activity than can be charted by means of meter, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and the like (although these remain underlying elements of this denser linguistic field). Thinking in terms of the performance of the poem reframes many of the issues labored over by prosodists examining the written text of poems, often syllable by syllable, phoneme by phoneme, accent by accent, foot by foot, stress by stress, beat by beat, measure by measure. The poem performed conforms even less to analysis of syllable and stress than the poem as read. Many prosodists have insisted that the (musical) phrase provides a more useful way of understanding poetry's sound patterns than do accentual systems, whether quantitative or syllabic, that break poetry into metrical feet. Consideration of the performed word supports that view, although the concept of phrasing and of musicality is much expanded when one moves from the metrical to the acoustic, beyond "free verse" to sound shapes. For one thing, the dynamics charted by accentual prosodies have a much diminished place in the sound environment of a poetry reading, where intonations, pitch, tempos, accents (in the other sense of pronunciation), grain or timbre of voice, nonverbal face and body expressions or movements, as well as more conventional prosodic features such as assonance, alliteration, and rhyme, take on a significant role. But more importantly, regularizing systems of prosodic analysis break down before the sonic profusion of a reading: it's as if "chaotic" sound patterns are being measured by grid-oriented coordinates whose reliance on context-independent ratios is inadequate. The poetry reading is always at the edge of semantic excess, even if any given reader stays on this side of the border. In fact, one of the primary techniques of poetry performance is the disruption of rationalizable patterns of sound through the intervallic irruption of acoustic elements not recuperable by monologic analysis. While these irruptions may be highly artful, they may also fall into the body's rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, "incorrect" pronunciations, and so on – that is, if you take these elements to be semantic features of the performed poem, as I propose, and not as extraneous interruption. [10]

Prosody is too dynamic a subject to be restricted to conventionally metrical verse. Yet many accounts of poetry continue to reduce questions of poetic rhythm to meter or regularized stress, as if nonmetrical poetry, especially the more radically innovative poetry of this century, were not more rhythmically and acoustically rich than its so-called formalist counterparts. In the acoustic space of performed poetry, I would emphasize distress and asymmetry, as much as accentual patter: dissonance and irregularity, rupture and silence constitute a rhythmic force (or aversion of force) in the sounded poem.[11] Such counterrhythmic elements create, according to Giorgio Agamben, "a mismatch, a disconnection between

the metrical and syntactic elements, between sounding rhythm and meaning, such that (contrary the received opinion that sees in poetry the locus of an accomplished and a perfect fit between sound and meaning) poetry lives, instead, only in their inner disagreement. In the very moment when verse affirms its own identity by breaking a syntactic link, it is irresistibly drawn into bending over into the next line to lay hold of what it has thrown out of itself."[12]

If studies of prosody foundered in the early twentieth century on the inability to reconcile the musicality of poetry with strictly metrical classifications, then recitation usefully transforms the object of study from meter to rhythm, to use the distinction made by Henri Meschonnic, for whom meter is asocial and without meaning, while rhythm is grounded in the historicity of the poem and implies a sociality. [13] The issue is not the written – the text – versus the oral, but the embodied acoustic performance – the aurality of the work – versus an abstract or external idealization that is based on a projection of time as a "smooth" space, which is unilinear, homogenous, and incremental. The new prosody requires an engagement not with abstract time but with duration and its microtones, discontinuities, striations, and disfluencies. Traditional metrics, with its metronomic beats, remains a fundamentally Euclidean system that is unsuited to a full measuring of the complex prosodies of the twentieth century or, moreover, much older poetry as well as the verbal art of cultures that fall outside the purview of traditional Western literary criticism.

In performance, meter is eclipsed by isochrony – the unwritten tempo (rhythmic, cyclical, overlapping) whose beat is audible in the performance as distinct from the text. In Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody, Charles Hartman quotes Karl Shapiro's comment that isochrony "equalizes unequal accentual elements by varying the time of feet, whether in the ear or in the recitation." [14] Hartman goes on to argue that "equivalence " has "only secondary bearing on English verse" (38); to which I would say: exactly the same secondary bearing as performance! Insofar as the performed word is granted a reciprocal status to the text, isochrony becomes a dominant prosodic element, not just in the poetry reading but also in the silent reading (I would now say silent recitation) of the poem, as well as in the composition of poem – whether "by ear" (in Charles Olson's phrase) or by sentence (in Ron Silliman's). In short, recitation rests on temporal rather than syllabic or accentual measure, which themselves may become secondary. This greatly expands the sense of isochrony from slight variations of non-stressed syllables to larger acoustic and lettristic units, and indeed the sort of isochronic practice I have in mind would allow for the equivalence of temporally unequal units. For this complex or "fuzzy" prosody of sound shapes, such polyrhythmic equivalencies are created by performed pauses, syncopations, emphasis, as well as shifts in tempo and pitch; just as on the page equivalencies are indicated by visual organization (lines irrespective of tempo), by nonmetrical counting (of syllables or words), and the like. The page's enjambment and syntactic scissoring become performance's isochronic disruption of syntactic flow, creating a contra-sense rhythm (or anti-rhythm) that is abetted by breaking, pausing (temporal caesura), and other techniques that go against the flow of speech rhythms. Isochrony may also be used to create a stereo or holographic effect, for example in the intense overlapping phrasal units in Leslie Scalapino's readings.

PERforMANCE readIly allows FOR stressING ("promotING") unstressED syllaBLEs, INcluding prepOsitionS, artiCLES, aNd conjunctIONS – creaTING SynCoPAtEd rHyThms, whiCH, onCE hEArd are THen caRRied oVer by readERS iNTo theIr oWN reAding of tHe teXT. (Let me stress that, as with many features I am discussing in the context of performance, it is often possible to hear such rhythmic and arhythmic patterns in the process of close listening to the written text of the poem, as in Stein's aptly titled prose-format poem How to Write. Gerard Manley Hopkins's marvelously delirious attempts to visually mark such patterns in his texts is exemplary.) Performance also underscores (or should I say underwrites?) a prosodic movement of which I am particularly fond, in which the poem suggests a certain rhythmic pattern over the course of perhaps, a few lines, then segues into an incommensurable

pattern, sometimes shuttling between the two, sometimes adding a third or fourth pattern: the prior pattern continues on underneath as a sort of sonic afterimage, creating a densely layered, or braided, or chordal, texture. The complex or fuzzy prosodics of such sprung rhythm produces the acoustic equivalent of a moiré pattern.

Performance also allows for the maximum inflection of different, possibly dissonant, voices: a multivocality that foregrounds the dialogic dimension of poetry. Hannah Weiner's performance of her Clairvoyant Journal is an exhilarating example – three competing voices of one "self" collide with one another in an electric ensemble consisting of Weiner, Peggy DeCoursey and Sharon Matlin in a tape published by New Wilderness Audiographics in 1976. But I am equally interested in the possibility of slippage among tones, dictions, accents, and registers in polyvocal performances in which different voices are evoked using performative cues rather than alphabetic ones. The potential here is to create rhythms and voicings that are not only supplemental to the written text but also at odds with it.

Such poetry is more usefully described as polymetrical or plurimetircal than as "free"; still, our technical vocabulary strains at accounting for more than a small portion of the acoustic activity of the sounded poem and there are a number of performative features that are only available in readings (in both senses) since they are not (readily) scorable in the lexical text. Ernest Robson, going steps further than Hopkins, developed an elaborate and eccentric system for scoring pitch and stress in the written texts of his poems.[15] Among the most resourceful attempts to designate acoustic features of performed poetry has been Erskine Peters's, in his work-in-progress Afro-Poetics in the United States. Peters, together with an associate at the University of Notre Dame, J. Sherman, has developed a "special font to document the sounds, rhythms, and melodies of the Afro-poetic tradition." [16] The sixty characters in Peters's system designate such acoustic figures as accelerated line pacing, accented long and short stretches, blue noting, bopping, calibrated stagger, call-response, chant, crypting, deliberate stutter, echo toning, extreme unaccented, falsetto, field hollering, gliding or glissando, glottal shake, guttural stress, humming, moan, ostinato, pegging, pitch alteration (heightened and lowered), quoting, riff, rushing, scatting, slurring (3 versions), sonorous chant stretching, sonorous inhaling, sonorous moaning, sonorous tremor, spiking, syllabic quaver, tremolo, and ululating rhythm.

One reason that Hopkins figures so prominently in Close Listening is that he initiates, within the English tradition, a complex prosody that requires performance to sound it out. With rational metrics, the "competent" reader could be presumed to be able to determine the poem's sound based on well-established principles. With complex prosody and poylmetricality, however, the performance establishes the sound of the poem in a way not necessarily, or not easily, deducible from the text.

Despite these many examples, many poetry performances tend to submit to, rather than prosodically contest, the anesthetized speech rhythms of official verse culture. Indeed, one of the effects of chatty introductions before each poem is to acoustically cue the performer's talking voice so that it frames the subsequent performance. David Antin radically extends and transforms such talk to become the main event of his performances, or "talk pieces," which remain among the postwar period's most provocative critiques of – and useful interventions within – the poetry reading. Conversely, when a poet makes no incidental remarks, it may be to allow the sound of the poem to have its full sway. Clark Coolidge is a particularly adept practitioner of this style, and his remarkable extensions and riffs on speech rhythms are all the more resonant on account of it.

What makes sound patterns expressive? Beats me. But a rose by any other name would no longer rhyme with doze or shows or clothes, unless the other name was pose or glows. A rose by any other name wouldn't be the same – wouldn't arouse the same associations, its sound iconicity might be close but no pajamas. Sound enacts meaning as much as designates something meant.

The relation of sound to meaning is something like the relation of the soul (or mind) to the body. They are aspects of each other, neither prior, neither independent. To imagine that a meaning might be the same despite a change of words is something like imagining that I'd still be me in a new body. (So disagreements on this matter are theological as much as metaphysical – they cannot be reduced to factual disputes.) It won't come as a big surprise to most people that a poet is investing so much in sound – no doubt we've been seduced into confusing the shell for the husk, or is it the pea for the nut?

J. H. Prynne, in "Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words," makes the argument quite well, though it does bear repeating, since repetition is never interesting for what is the same but for what is different: While verbal language may be described as a series of differential sound values, and while it makes sense to say that it is these differences that allow for meaning, it does not follow that the only meaning these sounds have lies in their difference from other sounds. Positive meanings adhere to sound in a number of ways. To speak of the positive, rather than merely negative or differential, meaning of sound does not rely on what might be called "pure" sound symbolism – the perception that particular sounds and dynamic features of sounds (as in pitch, constellations of sound, intonation, amplitude, timbre) have intrinsic meaning; though there is much that is appealing in this view, as Walter Benjamin shows in his "Doctrine of the Similar." The claim that certain sound vibrations have an inhering or immutable meaning is the perhaps mystical nodal point of a constellation of iconic attributes of language. Other points in this constellation cluster around the purely extrinsic meanings that adhere to sounds and dynamic features of sounds, either based on historical associations, which over time get hard-wired into some words or sounds; or, more intricately, based on the oral range made possible by a specific dietary pattern that alters the body's sounding board (dentation, palette, vocal chords, breath). Each language's specific morphology allows many possibilities for iconicity – from the physical size or number of characters in a word, to the number of syllables or patterns of syllables in a word, to associations with timbre or intonation or patterning. Iconicity refers to the ability of language to present, rather than represent or designate, its meaning. Here meaning is not something that accompanies the word but is performed by it. One of the primary features of poetry as a medium is to foreground the various iconic features of language – to perform the verbalness of language. The poetry reading, as much as the page, is the site for such performance.

Iconicity can also provide a way of hearing poetry readings, where the iconic focus shifts from an individual word to the chosen mode of performance; for example, the stress and tempo. I have already given an iconic reading of Baraka's performance style. John Ashbery's relatively monovalent, uninflected reading style – he is surely one of the masters of the anti-expressivist mode – is marked by an absence of isochronicity, a correlate to the fluidity and marked absence of parataxis in his texts. The cutting out of this rhythmic dynamic is iconically significant.

It is certainly not my intention to reinvent the wheel, just to let it spin words into acts. Any consideration of the relation of sound to poetry needs to point to the pioneering work of linguists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Roman Jakobson, Linda Waugh, George Lakoff, and many others. In a recent treatment of this topic, What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive, Reuven Tsur quite usefully emphasizes a distinction between the perception of speech sounds (the "speech mode" of listening) and material sounds (the "nonspeech mode"). [17] He argues that there is a marked cognitive difference in the way a listener hears a material sound – say a flapping flag or the pouring rain – and the way she or he hears human speech. Speech triggers a specific cognitive mode of interpretation in a way that material sound does not. This is something like the distinction Roland Barthes makes, in an essay called "Listening," between hearing (physiological) and listening (psychological). [18] According to Tsur, and following Jakobson, the "poetic function" of language is a third type: it involves hearing what we are listening to. That is, poetry creates something of the conditions of hearing (not just listening to) a foreign language –

we hear it as language, not music or noise; yet we cannot immediately process its meaning. Another way of saying this is that the poetic function – what Tsur calls "the poetic mode of speech perception" – rematerializes language, returns it from "speech" back to "sound"; or rather, the poetic mode synthesizes the speech mode of perception and the nonspeech mode of perception. I want to project this frame of reference onto Barthes's evocative speculations on rhythm in "Listening." Barthes uses Sigmund Freud's famous discussion of the child's game of fort / da, in which the child tosses out and pulls back a spool attached to a thread, as an example of a primal rhythmic oscillation of presence and absence, miming the presence and absence of the mother at the same time as it makes palpable the structure of the linguistic sign. It's as if when I say "you're here" / "you're not" the sounds are present but you are not. In the poetic mode of listening, there is an oscillation (or temporal overlap) between the materially present sound (hearing: the nonspeech mode) and the absent meaning (listening: the speech mode): this is a satisfaction of all reading aloud, as when we read stories and poems to children. The poetry reading allows for a particularly marked extension of this pleasure, especially when the performance seizes the opportunity to make rhythmic oscillations between its opaque soundings and its transparent references. No doubt this helps to explain the uncanny power of a great sound poem like Kurt Schwitters's "Merz Sonata," with its exquisite passages of child-like entoning, which evoked tears from its first hearers. But it also a quality inherent in the structure – the medium – of the poetry reading itself, and it can be found in its most ordinary forms. In this way, the poetry reading occupies a formal space akin to song, but one in which the musicality, or sound-grounding, of the language is produced strictly within the range of speech-mode perception. It is the transformation of language to sound, rather than the setting of language in sound, that distinguishes song from recitation.

As a matter of habituated fact, the distinction between speech perception and sound perception seems well established. I do hear the beat of a hammer, the lapping of water, or the bleat of a sheep in a way that is cognitively discontinuous with the way I listen to human speech. With the speech in which I am most at home, I automatically translate streams of sounds into streams of words with a rapidity and certainty that makes the sounds transparent – a conjuring trick that is slowed by variant accents and arrested by foreign tongues. But this transparency effect of language may be less an intrinsic property of speech than a sign of our opaqueness to the transhuman world, which also speaks, if we could learn (again) to listen, as writers from Henry David Thoreau in Walden to, most recently, David Abram in The Spell of the Sensuous have argued. "It is animate earth that speaks; human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse" (Abram, 179). Yet language is not just a part of the "animate earth," its sounds also echo the music of the nonanimate earth. Speech-mode perception, as an habituated response to language, may indeed preemptively cut off our response to nonhuman sounds – organic and machinic – at the same time as it dematerializes human language, muting its sonic roots in the earth as well as the world. Yet while Abram argues that our alienation from the sensuous is partly to be blamed on alphabetic writing, I would emphasize – against such self-proclaimed "oralist" perspectives – that our insistent separation of human and nonhuman sounds is not the result of writing (alphabetic or otherwise) but of human language itself. [19] Alphabetic aurality is not cut-off from the earth but is a material embodiment of it.

In attributing the transparency effect of language to speech-mode perception, I am eliding two prominent developmental models that provide powerful accounts of how and when language works to differentiate its users from their sensorial surroundings. In Revolution of Poetic Language, Julia Kristeva writes of infancy as an absorption in a pre-verbal "chora" that is (tellingly) a "rhythmic space" that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" and indeed "figuration." [20] Kristeva goes on to theorize the subsequent development of a symbolic order in which a "subject" emerges from the chora when the child is able to differentiate herself from her surrounds. For Kristeva, the chora – which she associates with radically poetic language – is anterior to "sign and syntax," anterior to the linguistic order of language: "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space

underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax" (29). Abram and Walter Ong write not of the development of individual subjects but of human culture, charting the alienation that alphabetic writing inaugurates in previously oral cultures in terms of the loss of the "presence" of the word, for Ong, and the loss of language's interconnectivity with the more-than-human world, for Abram. Yet both of these accounts rely on unilinerar, progressivist models of development. The implication is that one stage of human consciousness replaces or supersedes the next and that something like "poetic" language is needed to put us back in touch with – to return us to, or retune us with – the previous stage.

The problem is that writing does not eclipse orality nor does the symbolic law supercede the amorphousness of the "semiotic," any more than objectivity replaces subjectivity (or vice versa). We don't return to anything – turning (tuning) is enough. The power of symbolic – of the ego or the alphabet – does not come in Faustian trade for the virtually Edenic space of undifferentiated connectivity. Moreover, this originary myth is literally delusional, for it leads us away from the concrete material situation of our connectivity through the alphabet, through aurality, through the "symbolic." Better than to speak of the preverbal, we might speak of the omniverbal. Rather than referring to the presymbolic, we might say asymbolic or heterosymbolic. Instead of projecting a preliterate stage we might say analphabetic or heteroliterate: for aren't the petroglyphs and megaliths – those earliest human inscriptions made on or with rocks – already writing, already "symbolic." [21] As if the first human "babbling" were not already language, always social, a toll as well as a tool! We go "From amniotic fluid to / semiotic / fluidlessness," where the semiotic is drenched in the symbolic and the symbolic absorbed within the semiotic.[22] As Nick Piombino observes in his discussion of D. W. Winnicott in Close Listening, language is also a transitional object.

If "orality" or the "semiotic," aurality or logic, are stages, they are stages not on a path toward or away from immanence or transcendence but rather stages for performance: modalities of reason; prisms not prisons. Or let me put this in a different way: Perhaps the first writing was not produced by humans but rather recognized by humans. That is, it's possible that the human inscriptions on the petroglyphs frame or acknowledge the glyphs already present on the rock face (Lock, 415-16). Then we might speak of the book of nature, which we read as we read geologic markers or the rings around a tree ("can't see me!").

Poetry characterized as pre-symbolic (and praised or condemned as primitive, infantile or child-like, nonsensical, meaningless) would more accurately be characterized as post-symbolic (and thus described as paratactic, complex or chaotic, procreative, hyperreferential); just as such works, when they aver rationality, are not irrational. Rather, such works affirm the bases of reason against a dehumanizing fixation on the rigidly monologic and rationalistic. The problem is being stuck in any one modality of language – not being able to move in, around, and about the precincts of language. I am not anti-symbolic any more than I am pro-"semiotic." Rather I am interpolated in their folds, knowing one through the other, and hearing the echo of each in the next. This is what I mean to evoke by "a/orality" – sound language, language grounded in its embodiments.

Human consciousness has as much a sedimentary as a developmental disposition; stages don't so much replace each other as infiltrate or interpenetrate – I want to say perform – each other. Consciousness is a compost heap, to borrow a term from Jed Rasula. Neither the symbolic stage nor the rise of literacy marks language's de-absorption in the world. Language itself, speech itself, is a technology, a tool, that, from the first cultures to the first responses to the cry of a baby, allows us to make our way on the earth by making a world of it. The iconic sound shape of language beats the path.

Iconicity recognizes the ability of language to present its meaning rather than to represent or designate it. The meaning is not something that accompanies the words but is performed by them. Performance has the potential to foreground the inexorable and "counterlogical" verbalness of poetry – "thickening the medium" by increasing "the disparity between itself and its referents." [23] When sound ceases to follow sense, when, that is, it makes sense of sound, then we touch on the matter of language. [24] This is the burden of poetry; this is why poetry matters.
It is precisely because sound is an arational or nonlogical feature of language that it is so significant for poetry – for sound registers the sheer physicality of language, a physicality that must be the grounding of reason exactly insofar as it eludes rationality. Sound is language's flesh, its opacity as meaning marks its material embeddedness in the world of things. Sound brings writing back from its metaphysical and symbolic functions to where it is at home, in performance.

Sound, like poetry "itself," can never be completely recuperated as ideas, as content, as narrative, as extralexical meaning. The tension between sound and logic reflects the physical resistance in the medium of poetry. Rime's reason – the truth of sound – is that meaning is rooted in the arationality of sound, as well as in the body's multiple capacities for signification. Language is extra-lexical, goes beyond sense, and nothing shows this better than verbal performance, which, like the soundless performance of the body, exceeds what seems necessary to establish the substantive content of the poem – what it is saying, its metaphors and allusions.

In sounding language, we sound the width and breadth and depth of human consciousness – we find our bottom and our top, we find the scope of our ken. In sounding language we ground ourselves as sentient, material beings, obtruding into the world with the same obdurate thingness as rocks or soil or flesh. We sing the body of language, relishing the vowels and consonants in every possible sequence. We stutter tunes with no melodies, only words.

And yet sound, while the primary focus of my considerations here, is only one iconically expressive medium of the performing body, and I specifically want to leave room for the apprehension, by non-acoustic means, of some of the features I have attributed to sound. I am thinking of a conversation I had with the English poet and performer Aaron Williamson, who is deaf, in which he noted that he is able to experience many of the physicalizing features I have discussed in terms of sound. Rhythm is an obvious but crucial example: Williamson pointed out that he could feel the rhythm of the poet's performance while reading and looking at (something akin to listening and hearing) the poet's lips.

Poetry readings, like reading aloud (and this is something most explicitly marked in sound poetry), are a performance of the carnality of language – its material, sensuous embodiment. But this bodily grounding of language is not a cause for celebration any more than it is a reason for repression: it is a condition of human being and a fundamental material for poetry; call it language's animalady. Yet, in the present cultural context of the late twentieth century, this animalady loses its force as concrete experience when reified as (represented) speech or sentimentalized as (a return to) orality. The most resonant possibilities for poetry as a medium can be realized only when the performance of language moves from human speech to animate, but transhuman, sound: that is, when we stop listening and begin to hear; which is to say, stop decoding and begin to get a nose for the sheer noise of language.

Beyond all of these formal dimensions of the audiotext and the performed word, a primary significance of the poetry reading rests with its social character. Readings are the central social activity of poetry. They rival publishing as the most significant method of distribution for poetic works. They are as important as books and magazines in bringing poets into contact with one another, in forming generational and cross generational, cultural and cross-cultural, links, affinities, alliances, communities, scenes, networks, exchanges, and the like. While San Francisco and New York remain the centers of

poetic activity in the United States, dozens of cities across the country, and in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain, have active local reading series that serve to galvanize local poetry activity. The range of such activity is so great as to be difficult to document, since the written record is so much poorer than that of publications. This absence of documentation, together with the tendency among critics and scholars to value the written over the performed text, has resulted in a remarkable lack of attention given to the poetry reading as a medium in its own right, a medium that has had a profound impact on twentieth century poetry, and in particular the poetry of the second half of the century.

The reading is the site in which the audience of poetry constitutes and reconstitutes itself. It makes itself visible to itself. And while the most attention had been paid to those moments when the poetry reading has been a means for poetry to cross over to a wider audience – as in the antiwar and other politically-oriented readings of the 1960s or in some of the performance poetry of the present moment – the fundamental, social significance of the reading, it seems to me, has to do with infrastructure not spectacle. For this reason I would turn around the familiar criticism that everyone at a poetry reading is a poet to say that this is just what is vital about a reading series, even the essence of the poetry reading. For poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience of peers, where the poet is not performing to invisible readers or listeners but actively exchanging work with other performers and participants. This is not to say that reading series geared to a more "general" public or to students are not valuable. Of course they are. But such events resemble nonpoetry performances in that their value is dissemination to an unknown audience more than creation and exchange. They are not the foundries of poetry that a more introverted reading series can be. Poetry, oddly romanticized as the activity of isolated individuals writing monological lyrics, is among the most social and socially responsive – dialogic – of contemporary art forms. The poetry reading is an ongoing convention of poetry, by poetry, for poetry. In this sense, the reading remains one of the most participatory forms in American cultural life. Indeed, the value of the poetry reading as a social and cultural form can be partly measured by its resistance, up to this point, to reification or commodification. It is a measure of its significance that it is ignored. That is, the (cultural) invisibility of the poetry reading is what makes its audibility so audacious. Its relative absence as an institution makes the poetry reading the ideal site for the presence of language – for listening and being heard, for hearing and for being listened to.

NOTES

[*]Cardenal, "Song 56" (early 13th century), quoted in Gregory Nagy, Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); tr. Nagy, based on W. Pfeffer's The Change of Philomel: The Nightingale in Medieval Literarture. Spicer, "Thing Language" in Language in The Collected Books of Jack Spicer (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1975), p. 217

[1] There are only two collections that I have been able to locate that address the poetry reading: Poets on Stage: The Some Symposium on Poetry Readings, edited by Alan Zielger, Larry Zirlin, and Harry Greenberg in 1978 and The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language and Performance, ed. Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig in 1981. The accounts of poetry readings in these pioneering collections are largely anecdotal. Also notable are the annual reports for 1981 and 1982 of San Francisco's 80 Langton Street Residency Program, assembled by Renny Pritikin, Barrett Watten, and Judy Moran, which provided a number sustained accounts, by different writers, of a series of talks and readings and performances at the space. More recently, the Poetics List, an electronic discussion group archived at the Electronic Poetry Center (http:/wings.buffalo.edu/epc) often features accounts of readings and conferences (including lists of those in attendance at readings and even the occasional fashion report). In contrast, reflecting standard academic practice, there is no mention of Wallace Stevens's recorded poetry performance in a recent book on the poet by Anca Rosu, but there is some irony in this given the book's auspicious title, The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens

(Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), which only goes to show that metaphysics tends to displace physics.
[2] See Jerome Rothenberg, "The Poetics of Performance," in Vincent and Zweig, p. 123. See also David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous (New York: Pantheon, 1996), pp. 241-250.
[3] William Harris, The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), pp. 109-110; Harris extracts portions of the text, from which I quote below. See also Harris's interview with Baraka, where the poet agrees that his poem is a score and says he is principally interested in performance — "[the text] is less important to me" (p. 147). Harris briefly discusses Baraka's performances on pp. 59-60. See especially his discussion of the relation of music and dance to Baraka's work, starting on p. 106.
[4] See Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb," in Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[5] The passage is based on Andrew Benjamin, "Translating Origins: Psychoanalysis and Philosophy" in Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 24; all the references to poetry are my substitutions made to Benjamin's "original"; I have also elided a few phrases. See also Benjamin's The Plural Event: Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger.
[6] Nagy, p. 16. Nagy specifically sites McGann's work on "the textual condition."
[7] Nagy, p. 9; his emphasis. Quoted from Alfred Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 100. Dennis Tedlock's contribution to this collection is relevant here.
[8] This qualification is in response to a comment by Dennis Tedlock on this passage. Tedlock emphasizes that writing is also a performance and as such readily open to variation and revision. I am also grateful to other suggestions by Tedlock, which I have incorporated into the essay.
[9] Charles Lock, "Petroglyphs In and Out of Perspective," Semiotica 100:2/4 (1994), p. 418.
[10] I am well aware that prosodists can mask and analyze a performed poem in ways that will illustrate their particular theory (including quite conventional ones) – just as I have. This is no more than proper in such semantically dynamic terrain.
[11] The science of dysprosody is still in its infancy, although it is likely to dominate technical studies of unidentified poetic phenomena (UPPs) in the coming millennia. The Dysprosody Movement was founded by Carlo Amberio in 1950. A translation of its main theoretical document, The Dyssemia of Dystressed Syllables, from a previously undisclosed language into trochaic hexameter "blink" verse – a form Amberio believes to come closest to the counterintuitive thought patterns of unspoken American English – has long been forthcoming from the Center for the Advancement of Dysraphic Studies (CADS). (Blink verse, invented by Amberio, involves a fractal patterning of internal rhymes.)
[12] Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Prose," in The Idea of Prose, tr. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 40. Agamben's specific subject here is enjambment. Thanks to Carla Billitteri for bringing this essay to my attention.
[13] Henri Meschonnic, Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982).
[14] Charles O. Hartman, Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Shapiro is quoted from "English Prosody and Modern Poetry," ELH, 14 (June 1947), p. 81. This is a good place to thank George Lakoff for pointing me in several useful directions.
[15] See Ernest Robson's I Only Work Here (1975) and Transwhichics (1970), both from his own Primary Press in Parker Ford, Pennsylvania. On Robson, see Bruce Andrews's "The Politics of Scoring" in Paradise and Method: Poetics & Practice (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 176-77.
[16] I am grateful to Professor Peters for providing me with relevant sections of his manuscript. In a chapter entitled "African-American Prosody: The Sermon as a Foundational Model," he provides detailed descriptions for each of prosodic terms he employs.
[17] Reuven Tsur, What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?: The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). See pp. 11-14.

[18] Barthes, Roland, “Listening,” in The Responsibility of Forms, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).
[19] Dennis Tedlock comments: “But there is nothing intrinsic to the alphabet that makes its effects on perception inevitable. Such writing has been used in many places and periods without any notion that it is an adequate or sufficient notation of the sounds of speech. What is rather as issue is the projection of phonemics (with its linear system of differences) back onto speech and its installation as the very foundation of a flattened (and ‘scientific’) conception of language. Yet we can recognize that the sounds coming from the next room are those of a person speaking without being able to distinguish any phonemes!” (Personal communication, September 1, 1996.)
[20] Julia Kristeva, The Revolution in Poetic Language, tr. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 25-27.
[21] In his article on petroglyphs, already cited, Lock critiques the term “prehistoric”: “Better, surely, to speak of ‘ahistoric’ … and then note that ‘ahistoric’ also serves well for ‘illiterate’; by the word ‘ahistoric’ we might avoid the pejorative, and the Darwinian tendency” (p. 407). Here I yet again switch frames from human history to human development.
[22] The lines are from “Blow-Me-Down Etude,” in my collection, Rough Trades (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1991), p. 104.
[23] William K. Wimsatt, "On the Relation of Rhyme to Reason" in The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 217. Wimsatt is referring to poetry as text not to the performance of poetry.
[24] See Agamben, “The Idea of Matter,” p. 37.