

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Reading Performance

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2015

The basic question I want to ask is: Where are reviews of performances in our poetry press now? And what does this say about the discourse around orality?

Reviews of readings appear too infrequently to my mind and require major events in order to be cited rather than drawing on the regularity of that which is said aloud. Of course, this suggests not only a preference for writing compared to orality, if we dare to make such a distinction post Jacques Derrida, but also that we lack a sociology of readings, a critical way of examining them and very little criteria for thinking through poetry in a very common form. What follows is not a theory or an idea but introductory notes for a sociological study of poetry readings.

In ordinary language, sociology we might start by asking: what is happening at a reading? There is a speaker who reads words on a page to an audience that listens (or doesn't). It is a speech act, a delineated form of speech that approximates everyday conversation but differs markedly because it is, amongst other things, monologic for a longer period of time and has a different texture – people perform their readings in a way that the performance is not a sort of ordinary discipline, even as that can be a certain type of act. Rhythm, metre, pitch and a whole host of other qualities generally differ from 'normal'. It could also be thought of as a language game with its own rules and logic. But it is not enough to cite it as a speech act or draw on theories of language to discuss how this embodied social interaction occurs. Readings are an example of an 'interaction ritual chain'.

I use the term 'interaction ritual chain' in the same vein as Randall Collins, who claims it is 'a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership.' Ritual then is different from a ceremony like a wedding – it is far more common experience than the anthropological rendering of ritual with its religious connotations. In a poetry reading the audience may focus on the poet who makes a private discourse 'public', which generates solidarity and a shared language. The symbol of group membership might be a way of speaking, or it could be a book that refers to this speaking. We know, for example, who our fellow poets are because they hold their own books with tabs and post-it notes indicating what they are to read when it is their turn on the podium.

In the ritual people become entrained in each others' bodily micro-rhythms and emotions. We lean in to hear the quiet voices, laugh out loud to show our support for the funny ones, clap at the end for roughly the same time as everyone else to say 'thank you' to the poet and signal our position in the collective. The ritual can be thought of as having inputs ('ingredients') and outputs ('outcomes').

A poetry reading then might be an interaction ritual with two people – the reader and the listener – in a kitchen or it could involve hundreds at a graduation ceremony. Most readings though are medium sized rituals. They take place in cafés, pubs, bookstores, universities, town halls and homes. There are barriers to entry, which are more often cultural than economic. Poetry seems paradoxically both very open and at the same time remarkably closed off. The common object of attention at the ritual is the reader, and people share a common mood even as they bring their own feelings to the interaction.

After the ritual there is a sense of shared experience, an emotional outcome, and an action. The symbols might be the books that are for sale or the compliments that people often repeat. Finally, there may be feelings of morality and this is where criticism is significant. Aesthetic judgements of the poems one has just listened to are always, to some extent, moral. One can be outraged and find the group unreceptive and hence be ostracised. One can be overcome, start to cry and think that one will never write poetry as good as that which has just been read and abandon one's work. One can be too open to the world and be unable to judge what has happened in any critical way. All of these are moral outcomes that are potentially actionable. Either way the feelings of morality structure and demarcate what is appropriate criticism.

The second part of what is happening at a reading is elaborate citation, a process of referring to living members of the group through glances and other embodied languages as well as the past language of other poets. If we hear a certain phrase we might recognise that a previous author has combined language in the same way before and hence we think about the current poet's relationship. For example, we might hear 'etherised' and be reminded of T. S. Eliot and wonder what the poet is doing by invoking this word. Of course, we could drive ourselves mad in the process of trying to find where every phrase 'comes from'.

I think these two aspects lead us to status groups. Poetry is about status rather than money. Status groups then revolve around honour, or to extrapolate around cultural capital. We cannot deny that there are material outcomes to poetry including books, small cheques, grants and perhaps even tenure. However, money or property or commodities do not dominate it.

So much of our critical culture depends upon readings and yet there is very little written discussion of what is happening at a reading, which might suggest there is not enough considered reflection on these rituals. Poetry relies on face-to-face conversations far more than prose, and, word of mouth is essential to the economy of poetry. Yet not enough attention is paid to what makes a performance worthwhile and refers back to the page, or what a spoken word or slam poet is like regardless of whether or not they write anything down at all. Writing is not just about posterity and it is not sealed off from orality. There are different relations between types of reading and writing that are important to think through. Attention to sociology will change how we think of readings as a shared emotional interaction. Focusing on this predominantly oral ritual will also change how we review books in general and it is a change I am looking forward to.

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