University of Canberra

Paul Magee***Poetry and risk: On the similarities between recital and composition****Abstract*

'Every time,' Brazilian director, teacher, writer and erstwhile politician, Augusto Boal claims, 'an actor plays a character, he or she plays it for the first and last time. Like we play every minute of our own lives' (Boal 2002: 38). This article concerns the experiment of making by heart recitals of canonical twentieth century poems a compulsory assessment item in a creative writing unit. It details some surprising results of that experiment. One is that students demonstrated more capacity to develop a confident aesthetic about the rights and wrongs of their peers' recitals than when engaging in similar group discussions about those same students' verse compositions. The paper suggests that this disparity had to do with the students' broad literacy in relation to acting, compared to their relative illiteracy in relation to what can be done in verse. It makes the further claim, with reference to Boal's Games for Actors and Non-Actors (Boal 2002), Stephen Berkoff's I am Hamlet (Berkoff 1989) and other texts, that this situation might not be as hopeless as it sounds. Could it be that by heart recitals brought these students closer to that form of creativity they actually already well know from film, stage and life, but need to get on the page: the one to do with inhabiting the tensions of the moment, and acting them out? For they also seemed to be writing much better poems.

Keywords: poetry composition, acting, pedagogy

1 Performing a role

This article is about reciting anthologised poems by heart. [1] But it is also about the composition of original verse. The two things are often thought to be polar opposites. I am less and less convinced they are.

Quiet resolve. The intense determination to wipe the slate clean of anything that went before, anything but this.

Suddenly you have a role to play and a task, the performing of which will highlight everything in its path. When you are given a difficult role to do – whether as an actor or in life – the effort that is summoned up is also going to throw out much that was of value before. Suddenly the task makes men of us: we are engaging all our equipment, all our mental faculties and courage to deal with it, and in dealing with it we also find much in our pre-role life that was insipid. Or the role brightens the light we carry in our minds – the searchlight that gets dim with

constant self-interest. Now it is like a fire lighting everything in its path. Beware those who are exposed to it – nothing seems right again. Everything is vapid, silly, useless and pretend; only what is vital is worth living for and the meaning of life and the values for which you lay down your life suddenly become very clear. (Berkoff 1989: 43)

I am quoting from actor / director Stephen Berkoff's line-by-line account of how he directed *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, including how he decided to act each of his lines as they arose. Not that one's prior decisions – 'There is something dreadfully disquieting about waiting to say your first speech' (Berkoff 1989: 8) – always come off in such a space. Animal metaphors abound: 'The text opens the door and out comes the tiger' (37). 'I turn away, since I feel a building of tension that allows no exit except through violence' (168). 'Having brought the bull to charging point I step aside' (169). Berkoff, playing Hamlet, repeatedly returns to the disturbing potential of the moment. I recall Wittgenstein, writing, 'Within all great art there is a WILD animal: tamed' (Wittgenstein 1980: 37e).

I hesitated over beginning with this long quote from *I am Hamlet*, not wanting to make this a discussion of gender. Actually the gendering of Berkoff's words ('Suddenly the task makes men of us') is entirely relevant to the question I wish to raise here. Carole Pateman, discussing the nineteenth century analogy critics of capitalism made between work and prostitution, remarks that the analogy was effective because it triggered associations to femininity, discursively linked at that point, as often still now, to a lack of agency (Pateman 1988: 201-2). Berkoff is doing almost the opposite here, in associating the recital of set lines with a successful trial of masculine power. For him, to perform a received role – a role as received as Hamlet! – is the epitome of agential power. What I think this underlines is that there is something really quite contrary to stage experience in our tendency sharply to distinguish reciting other peoples' lines (especially if learned 'by rote') from original, creative activity. (It is worth adding, in relation to gender, that the risk-laden, charged space Shakespeare's text 'opens the door' to appears, from Berkoff's broader presentation of it in *I am Hamlet*, neither specifically masculine nor specifically feminine; it seems rather more scary than that, and possible.)

Consider, in contrast to Berkoff, how the act of 'performing a role' is figured in the traditions of humanities and social sciences scholarship that hover in the background of any tertiary-level creative writing class, subtly inflecting the pedagogical decisions made within it. With rare exceptions (e.g. Turner 1974), the invocation of 'role' serves in such traditions as a way of undercutting a subject's presumptions of autonomy. It allows the theorist to lay stress instead on the pre-determining power of class, gender, profession, membership in the national 'imagined community' and so forth. 'When people occupy social positions,' we read in Abercrombie, Hill and Turner's *Dictionary of sociology*, 'their behavior is determined mainly by what is expected of that position'. Its entry on 'role' continues, now invoking those:

bunches of socially defined attributes and expectations associated with social positions. For example, an individual school teacher performs the role of "teacher" which carries with it certain expected behaviours irrespective of his or her own personal feelings at any one time. (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1984: 180)

The concept of ‘role’ is ‘sociologically important,’ the authors continue, ‘because it demonstrates how individual activity is socially influenced and thus follows regular patterns’ (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1984: 180-1). *Performing a role* is here equivalent to *being subject to*. Perhaps even while thumbing their preface, ‘How to use this dictionary’ (11).

I do not resale, by the way, from the elements of truth in Abercrombie, Hill and Turner’s description of teaching – particularly in the context of the ever more marketised, and as a consequence socially conformist (Davies 2005: 7) structures that have beset higher education systems globally, since the late 1970s (Marginson 1997; 2013). It seems to me that Louis Althusser’s 1970 critique of the part which teachers play for capital has become more acute in the decades since: ‘in this concert, one ideological State apparatus certainly has the dominant **role**, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School.’ (Althusser 1971: 155, my bold). The fact is that both secondary and tertiary systems increasingly serve, through examination and other “competitive” mechanisms for generating results on merit, to legitimate the process by which the more prestigious and well-paid jobs go to those sections of the population with the wealth to “invest” in education in the first place (see the stinging argument in Marginson 1997: 133-39; also Piketty 2014: 418). That is one of the roles we play, even – or perhaps especially (see Oakley 2009: 8-10, on the skewed ethnic and class composition of cultural labour) – in the creative arts. And there is little way out of it. It needs to be said.

But I also wish to mark how deep a disparity there is between the social theorist’s or political critic’s pejorative usages of terms like ‘role’, ‘performance’ and ‘script’ and even ‘score’ (Althusser: ‘This concert is dominated by a single score ... the score of the ideology of the current ruling class’ [Althusser 1971: 154]), and the way these or similar words are invoked in relation to the creative practices of acting and reciting that do, after all, remain in the background of any such usage. Consider, for the stark contrast, music reviewer Jeffrey Joseph’s comments on a certain, poor rendition of a Tchaikovsky violin concerto. ‘One aches,’ Joseph writes:

for the risks and surprises that are often eloquent of genuine musical thought. That the playing is to be tidy and fastidious but routine is apparent from the start of the Tchaikovsky.
(Cumming 2000: 25)

What Joseph’s statement underlines, in the lack, is that we listen to the performance of a score because we might thereby encounter risks, surprise, genuine thinking. Not that that is ever assured. But nor is anything.

When you are given a difficult role to do – whether as an actor or in life....

2 Programme

What follows is a story about teaching. It is a story about teaching in which the teacher is the one who is taught. The key element in that story of ‘being taught’ concerns my learning, in the space of a morning, what it is to act. I will focus on that event and its consequences in what follows, as it led most directly to the pedagogical outcomes I want to reflect upon here: a certain link forged between by heart recital and original composition. In the process I will consider what some others have written about the pedagogical value of memorization and recital. In this way I will begin to introduce the argument, to be fully elaborated over a series of articles, that we should reorient key aspects of the creative

writing poetry workshop around a relation to acting. But I will make my way to that claim slowly, by way of a story about teaching.

3 Being read by a poem

I have since 2004 convened a unit at the University of Canberra entitled *Poetry and the Imagination*. The point of the unit is to draw students out to the extent that they start producing original compositions in verse. I place a great deal of stress in these classes on the impossible ideal of originality, often quoting Mayakovsky's strange primer on composition in the process:

I am not going to give the rules by which a man [2] can become a poet and write verse. In general, there are no such rules. A man is called a poet precisely because he creates these same poetic rules. (Mayakovsky 1972: 125)

One notes the paradox here: a poet is so original as to create rules for others. Consider Milton, then the status of blank verse after him. Only anyone who follows the rules thus inaugurated is no longer a poet. Which is why all these *How to Write* books 'merely described historical methods of composition which had become commonplace. The correct title for these books would not be *How to Write*, but *How They Used to Write*' (Mayakovsky 1972: 129). Mayakovsky has no time for the past. He has even less for those 'ardent apologists of antiquity' who take 'refuge from the new art behind the backsides of historical monuments' (123).

I am not going to give the rules

The unit is more or less Mayakovskian in inspiration. We try to set about composing, without a rule-book at hand.

It is nonetheless the case that I have consistently required students in this same unit, *Poetry and the Imagination*, to learn by heart and recite before the class some twenty lines of one of the poems in John Leonard's *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English* (Leonard 2003). Keenly alert to musicality, and its subtle relation, in the best verse, to a thinking in action, Leonard's selection from the last century's poems is outrightly postcolonial, ranging over New Zealand, Indian, Nigerian, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and First People's traditions. There is nothing conservative in that selection, a new canon in its own right. What sets my students' and others' eyebrows askance in relation to it, is my practice of requiring that each student memorize and publicly recite one of the poems from it. This is a key assessment item, on par with original composition.

I have often wondered why I set this task, given how contradictory such memorialisation seems to the Mayakovskian line I am otherwise trying to tread in the unit. I have, I confess, long recognized this contradiction and done nothing about it. Actually, I think it is a profound part of our job as teachers to be contradictory – provided we honestly and respectively believe in the two clashing things we are trying to get across (in other words, I don't think you can plan it this way). Thus we allow a gap for our students to surpass us, one day making sense where we ourselves could not. I think this is particularly important in the creative arts.

But beyond that perverse and at any rate retrospective motive, I would have to say that my initial reason for setting compulsory memorisation and recital in a unit dedicated to *making it new* was more in the way of a stammering towards

the rationale Matthew Arnold gave for the practice in the late 1850s. Responding positively to the official decision to make by heart recital a central component of a new curriculum for trainee-teachers, Arnold opined that, in addition to the trainee's immediate gain in poetic knowledge:

a second and more precious fruit will in time grow; they will be insensibly nourished by that which is stored within them, and their taste will be formed by it. (quoted in Robson 2012: 60)

These approving comments come hand-in-hand with an expression of Arnold's great distaste for the practice by heart recitation was at that point replacing, the examination of literature by paraphrase. Arnold refers to trainee-teachers' 'almost universal failure to paraphrase ten lines of prose or poetry, without doing some grievous violence to good sense or good taste' (quoted in Robson 2012: 60).

One does not have to go too far to find similar-sounding motives for present-day revivals of the practice of by heart recital. In a piece published in *Writing in education* in 2014, for instance, Ed Reiss states that 'the point of a poem is the poem itself, not the paraphrase or the critique' (Reiss 2014: 62). I am citing from his "'Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart": on learning "Tintern Abbey"'. In it, Reiss describes how, after an intense process of analyzing and even obsessing upon specific word clusters in Wordsworth's lines (e.g. all the repeated words, all the internal rhymes, all the pronouns – 'the potential patterns are endless' [2014: 63]), he one day found all one hundred and fifty-nine lines lodged in his head. This was without any rote learning at all. But all the while he was gaining a profounder, lived-through, sense of the lush diction of the poem's lines, with their

steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion, and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
(Wordsworth 1968: 138)

Reiss rejects paraphrase: it is curious to note the way analysis nonetheless features in his approach. Another nuanced critique of paraphrase in favour of the close-up experience which by heart recital facilitates, can be found in Jean Sprackland's article 'Those Winter Sundays' (Sprackland 2014). Appearing in the same, special issue of *Writing in education (Poetry, memory and performance)* as Reiss's, Sprackland's paper comprises a meditation on the memorization of poetry, in part through reflection on her experience of knowing Robert Hayden's 'Those Winter Sundays' since her undergraduate days.

In the course of the piece, Sprackland touches upon a familiar characterisation of knowing poetry by heart. Many, she writes, think of this as something they were:

made to do in an uninspiring way, the whole class learning by rote and then parroting back, the teacher beating time on the edge of the desk with a ruler, the poem horribly dismembered into meaningless chunks to be swallowed and regurgitated.
(Sprackland 2014: 28)

But for Sprackland, there can be 'joys' to the 'memorizing and reciting' of poems that this picture fails to accommodate. Among them is the way these conjoint practices can help us avoid some of 'the more mechanistic teaching approaches we've all seen over the past twenty years or so.' Sprackland has in

mind lessons where the poem is presented to the class as ‘a way to something else: a social issue, a political question, a consideration of something beyond the poem.’ Such approaches have value, of course. But in leaping to make sense, these tend to obscure the fact that ‘good poems are always, in some way, mysterious’ (Sprackland 2014: 29). If this is mystic, Sprackland’s next comment borders on the heretical:

at some point over the last ten years or so it began to dawn on me that there was too much striving going on – that it might be better if teachers were encouraged to do less. (Sprackland 2014: 29)

That hers is not, for all that, an anti-intellectual position is implicit in her commitments elsewhere in the piece: for what the teacher’s act of doing less opens space for, is more time for dwelling on the actual words of the poem, including more of the swathes of time necessary for memorizing them. By dwelling more closely, students come to realize – something surely connected with the fact that ‘good poems are always, in some way, mysterious’ – that ‘a significant feature of ... any good poem, is that it rewards reading again and again’ (Sprackland 2014: 29). Mind, such re-reading is not always a voluntarily process. As Sprackland’s history with that terrifically moving Hayden poem illustrates, ‘the memorized poem sneaks in at the edge of consciousness ... at all sorts of odd moments’ (30). And all of this is as much as to say that to memorize, with all the voluntary and involuntary repetition that betokens, may bring one closer to the polyvalent being of the poem. As Nietzsche, or at least one of his voices, claimed:

The more emotions we allow to speak in a given matter, the more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our “objectivity”. (Nietzsche 1956: 255)

While if ‘there is something essential about speaking poems’ (Sprackland 2014: 28), a practice of memorization that leads to recital will lead you to know the poem from this angle as well. One comes to know more of its pleasures.

Part of which must be loss of control. Sprackland describes how her regular practice of reciting ‘Those Winter Sundays’ to classes has in recent years been interrupted by a desire, towards the end of the poem, and though she is reciting publicly, to weep (30). Andrew Motion’s introductory comment to the special issue is apposite: a memorized poem will not only ‘grow and change’ as we do; it can leave us feeling ‘read by it even as we read it’ (Motion 2014: 1). Public recital seems to leave one particularly vulnerable to this, as I know from my own experiences of reading cherished poems, both memorised and otherwise, to classes.

I cannot say, to return to my *Poetry and the Imagination* unit, that I had all of Arnold’s, Reiss’s or Sprackland’s acutely worked out ideas in mind when first setting memorization and recital as assessment tasks. But some stammering in these directions must have been driving me. On reflection, Mayakovsky was probably driving me to it as well. How better to give students a taste, without rules, of the poetry they were trying to produce, than in the vulnerability of their own bodies? It certainly seemed to me, at the time, that a student who had Seamus Heaney’s ‘Punishment’ to heart would be in a much better position to judge whether his or her own compositions had anything like that power, or not. I hoped he or she would meanwhile be gaining a lived, therefore critical, sense of the suppleness of Heaney’s rhythms. And maybe would start to feel a little read by the poem too.

4 The arrival of the bee box

That collection of rationales already, I believe, adds up to an argument for setting by heart recital in a unit aimed at original creative composition. But let me turn to what happened next.

In 2014, I took up an invitation to participate in a day organized by Kate Flaherty, who is a scholar of Shakespearean performance traditions, and an actor in her own right. The day was called *Finding the fourth dimension: learning through practice in the arts and the humanities*, and was centred on a workshop by Bridget Escolme entitled ‘Displaying early modern emotion: the challenges of *Measure for Measure* in contemporary performance’. Bridget is a scholar focused on contemporary and past realisations of early modern drama. As well as acting and directing she dramaturgs, including for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her workshop at the Australian National University (ANU) involved dramaturging us through some of Shakespeare’s lines as if we were actual actors. That turned my head around.

Our task for the day was to find ways to recite Isabella’s concluding soliloquy to Act II, Scene IV, of *Measure for Measure*. It begins:

To whom should I complain? Did I tell this
Who would believe me? (Shakespeare 1969: 95)

The lecherous Angelo has just exited the stage, having let Isabella know that unless she sleeps with him, her brother Claudio (Angelo is currently ruling over Vienna as the absent Duke’s deputy) will be killed. Bridget explained that Isabella’s motives, in the soliloquy that follows, were open to a range of interpretations (*good poems are always, in some way, mysterious*). It culminates in Isabella’s decision to ask her brother for his life, for:

had he twenty heads to tender down
On twenty bloody blocks, he’d yield them up,
Before his sister should her body stoop
To such abhorred pollution. (Shakespeare 1969: 95)

Isabella’s motives for requesting this self-sacrifice from her brother are chaste, utterly so; but the fact that they entail his death intimates something darker. Bridget mentioned unconscious sibling rivalry, as one such reading.

We began by reciting the soliloquy in the round, each taking a line in sequence. This reminded me of when I have asked students to perform a similar exercise with Canto I of *Don Juan*. For all my lectures on prosody, nothing illustrates the topic as vividly as forty or so bodies becoming entranced by and inflected with the rhythm of Byron’s pentameter, each person reading a line of the poem in turn as it moves around the auditorium. Within five or six lines a sway takes hold of the group. Likewise here, in relation to Shakespeare’s more sparsely rhyming, but still taut lines. Again, and just as quickly, the pentameter took hold of the group. You might say the lines were starting to read us – at the very least, that we were being scanned.

Next, Bridget asked anyone who felt like it to read as many words into the soliloquy as he or she wanted, and then stop, the idea being that another in the circle would spontaneously elect to take over. That second reader was to continue the soliloquy as far as he or she in turn wanted – a word, a phrase, a line, half the speech – then stop, for another to come in. And so on. The risk in

the room turned up a notch. Will I try to resume the reading just as another does? How will there not be a dreadful silence when I stop? How can we do this without a clear idea who goes next? Don't you need someone to be in charge?

The smoothness with which we felt our way into catching, and continuing, the recitation mid-line, sometimes even mid-phrase, was startling evidence of a spontaneous organization, and must have had something to do with that pentameter swaying through the room. But what became equally apparent was the composition of Isabella's soliloquy as a conversation of contrasting voices and tones within the one, resolutely one-eyed, speaker:

More than our brother is our chastity.
I'll tell him yet of Angelo's request,
And fit his mind to death, for his soul's rest.
(Shakespeare 1969: 95)

By the time this exercise had come to a close, I was fully ready for Bridget's instruction that we break into small groups and take turns giving individual performances of the entire soliloquy. I was half-way through relishing, relishing as if I were Isabella unconsciously relishing them, the words 'On twenty bloody blocks' before recalling that I had never acted before in my life. In fact, the very thought filled me with terror. Now I fairly spat out my honey-tongued soliloquy, wanting, on some level disturbing to me, to make my brother pay for this.

5 Being 'alive' in a scene

That was mid-2014. Two changes to my teaching immediately ensued.

The first, called 'the Human PowerPoint', is that I no longer use the overhead projector. In the past I would project a poem such as Wole Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation', read it, or ask another to read it aloud to the class, and then ask the students to read it off the screen a second time, in private. We would then analyse the poem, with reference to the lines up on the screen. We now eschew that visual aid altogether, instead reading poems aloud straight from the book, using either of the two techniques from Bridget's seminar: reading the poem in a round, a line each; or having a volunteer to read as far as he or she will, for another to then catch and continue the reading. The effect is to bring the poem into the room via our bodies. Of course eyeballs do that as well, as Marx famously stated (Marx 1930: 45). But this way feels much more like acting.

A second change: students recite poems by heart, as always. But their recitations are now followed by peer workshopping of what went well in each performance, and what did not.

I had never opened performances up for workshopping in this fashion, seeing the recitals more as a sign of artistic allegiance to practices outside the university norm than anything we might further discuss. Did not Arnold write that 'a second and more precious fruit will in time grow', one that had little to do with any discourse or paraphrase (Robson 2012: 60)? Indeed, why talk about it? The fact that students occasionally complained about memorisation and recital not being genuinely university tasks only steeled me in this resolve to keep a university-style discussion out of it. In fact, it steeled me in the resolve to keep this non-university task in the curriculum in general. We were meant, after all, to be poets.

Bridget's workshop buoyed me up to acknowledge the limitations of these positions. Why be afraid? We would now discuss the rights and wrongs of each recital, in the instants after it occurred.

I feel the need further to explain my earlier position on this. For, actually, there are reasons if not to be afraid, at least to have concern. That is to say, I am one of a number of teachers in creative writing and composition who feel significant reservations about 'the peer review process at the heart of the workshop' (Irvine 2010: 131) – at least as currently practised. I have in mind Adnot-Haynes and Mellas's discussion of the narrow forms of judgement the workshop fosters (Adnot-Haynes & Mellas 2010), Mimpriss on social conformity in the workshop space (Mimpriss 2009), Irvine on the problem of peer judgments of academic writing based on limited knowledge of the genre (Irvine 2010), Vanderslice on the same issue, in relation to fiction (Vanderslice 2010). Obviously teachers have a 'role' to play here, in leading the group away from such pitfalls. But my earlier invocation of Althusser is intended to underline that the historically-given spaces in which we work are regularly beyond our individual powers to change as well. Peer feedback sessions strike me as particularly difficult in this regard.

To clarify, my issue is not to do with students' having to face judgement *per se*. Nor is it for any of the authors I have just cited. On my part, I would say that the act of putting an artwork into the world is itself an act of judgement. It is an act of judgement as to what will generate in a reader that 'free play of the imagination and the understanding' which Kant so acutely described (Kant 2000: 103), i.e. that dizzying, peculiar species of intellectual and bodily pleasure art holds forth, challengingly. Any attempt on that space is open to interrogation. Indeed, such an artwork is not only a judgement, but an interrogation in its own right, a problematizing of the joins between habit and whatever exceeds its comforts. My issue has rather to do with the incoherence of the judgements tertiary-level writing students are called upon to face, when offering poems up to their fellow students. Haphazard images in prose rhythms are regularly applauded for simple want of knowing that one can find better. On the other hand, great lines are frequently ignored, and just as frequently critiqued for trivial reasons. I am referring to a broad cultural illiteracy to do with the avoidances built into our education systems and popular media. Most students have to be taught, for instance, the very basic facts that verse generally has to be read at a speaking pace, and at times even more slowly, and that it most reveals its pleasures when one returns, to reread and dwell. But there is also a problem with the setting. The democratic nature of what is still basically a tutorial space tends to put comments from the few in the room who have spent years honing their appreciation of poetry on the same level as comments coming from the majority of other students, even though that majority is commenting on the basis of criteria gathered from years of prose-reading.

One can, it is true, exert a certain critical authority in such scenarios. Poet and educator Aileen Kelly put it this way, when I interviewed her some seven years back, in Melbourne:

I said to a writing group the other day that I felt that – I must admit I was being tough with them – it was as though they were trying to paint a portrait with the skills they learnt painting a living room. They were using words as in prose. (Kelly 2007)

Sometimes such comments break through, particularly when couched in such brilliant metaphor; but at the risk, as Kelly implies, of appearing disciplinarian or elitist, and at any rate in basic conflict with a tutorial model developed

around providing training in intellectual conversation much more than a reliable source of qualitative judgements on art. There is only so much one can do as teacher with that contouring circumstance. Personally, I despair of how often I hear the group run with an eager appraisal of lines I know are unpublishable to say nothing of unmemorable. I despair of how often a student's honest critiques, especially when acute, are treated by others in the group – with the weight of numbers on their side – as mere statements of personal taste. It is hard to see the learning in such moments.

Only that does not quite hold, as far as poetry recital goes. That my often negative experience, for all my efforts to shift it to something more productive, of group workshoping did not pertain in that case quickly became clear over the second half of 2014. Buoyed up by Bridget's workshop, I decided, as I wrote above, to train this poorly functioning technology of peer feedback on something that did not concern composition *per se*, something more to do with acting. I wanted to see what would happen if I did.

For the first few assessments (students were reciting Medbh McGuckian's 'The War Ending', Anne Carson's 'TV Men: Thucydides in Conversation with Virginia Woolf on the Set of *The Peloponnesian War*', John Muk Muk Burke's 'Us'), I took a guiding role, pointing out features to do with getting a natural pacing into the lines, the clarity of diction necessary to allow rhythms to be heard, the importance of thinking about how to perform line breaks, the imperative to allow emotion without swallowing the performance in it, and so on.

What startled me was how swiftly the twenty odd students in each tute internalized my leads, and began to make critical comments on each others' recitals that were not only frequently convincing, but at times highly perceptive as well. This was increasingly the case, as the semester progressed. I heard comments of the order of (these are direct quotes): 'You paced it very well over the first two stanzas, though "harvest wheat" was a bit swallowed'; 'You conveyed the emotion of Auden's "I love you" very well'; 'There was something of a monotone creeping in over lines eleven and twelve'; 'You handled Browning's enjambment from "the first" to "are you to turn" beautifully'; 'Your staccato vividly accentuated "the grill lights"'; 'I found "the heroin whore" particularly well dramatized, in fact the whole run of lines from nineteen to twenty-seven.' Not only were students making nuanced observations. They were gaining the skill to audit a performance of twenty lines, all the while holding in memory specific moments in it, for the sake of critical comment. This led to confident and convincing judgements.

Even more vitally: it was clear that the performances were themselves improving every week. I was led to the following conclusion: open, critical discussion of recital was having an impact on recital itself. Attentive auditing and discussion were leading to better acting!

The sort of competencies I am referring to are well illustrated by poetry educator Mario Petrucci, in his description of an exercise he uses when coaching people to read poetry in public. He calls it 'Holding the Thought', explaining that in 'this activity, a partner stops you ... when, in some way, you lose intimate contact with a text you're reading to them out loud.' Petrucci insists that the crux of this one-on-one exercise is the way it relies upon:

a sense, in the *listener*, that the reader knows, unhesitatingly, exactly where they are and where they're going, that they're utterly inside the text and what it means, rather than feeling their way through it or handing it over in a detached way, as a series of phrases. Indeed, a great recitation comes across as a

kind of hologram, where the whole is somehow present in every passing part. (Petrucci 2014: 50)

Interestingly, Petrucci does not seem to feel that such an alert listener is all that hard to come by.

Certainly my students were rapidly possessed of the critical capacity Petrucci unproblematically vests in 'the listener' in this exercise. They swiftly gathered the capacity to point out, with accuracy (e.g. lines nineteen to twenty-seven of 'An Open Window on Chicago'), those moments when the reciter was 'utterly inside the text and what it means', and those when not. They were spotting when that reciter was, now in Stephen Berkoff's words, 'alive' to the text:

Once 'alive' in a scene you can do no wrong, and every actor knows what I mean... In these times we are inspired and can do no wrong. Nothing can shake us and disaster is even welcomed as a challenge. It is an effervescence when all your nerves seem to light up and you score the jackpot; the sluice gates open and the adrenalin is flowing freely. It's almost like a state of grace. (Berkoff 1989: 112)

But it is not simply, as I stated above, that my students were by dint of the workshopping becoming capable of noting such graceful stretches in others' performances. They were creating them in their own.

I can only put this outcome down to the following, quite obvious, fact. Our students are culturally literate in acting, deeply so, and in direct converse to their illiteracy in the enjoyment, and therefore judging, of verse. We as educators need to think more about this.

6 Performance and risk

The act of analyzing and making judgements on others' recitals improved my students' own recitals. How does that work? Don't we feel that creativity in the execution of an action, and analysis of that same action are categorically separate spheres? Isn't the first to do with how one acts in the spontaneity of the moment, drawing on resources much deeper – or perhaps just nearer the surface – than any intellection per se? Naomi Cumming's discussion (2000) of what it is to be formed as an repertoire performance artist can cast some light here, and in the process lay the ground for the argument promised above: that there is an unexpectedly close relationship between by heart recital and original verse composition.

But to get there, we need first to consider what repertoire performance actually involves. The way to do that, I suggest, is through considering what best practice in such an endeavour involves, quite literally in terms of the practices it involves. In her posthumously published, *The Sonic self: musical subjectivity and signification*, Cumming argues that what we refer to and applaud as a concert violinist's 'personality' (Cumming 2000: 23) is not prior to, but rather inseparable from his or her mastery of technique. Cumming describes the day she realized, 'by careful induction' as a child, that she could meet her instructor's emotive demand to 'Emote!' by 'increasing the frequency of my vibrato. That is when I discovered emotion as a quality of sound' (3). She proceeds to cite Henry James's famous statement 'I cry, therefore I feel sad' as illustration of the fact that our emotions are felt in our kinesthetic experience as much as in our minds (34). What is more, and for this reason, 'a student's subjective states' can be 'manipulated directly by altering his or her technical

means of producing expressive sound' (8). It is that very same manipulation, of course, that is achieved upon the audience to a performance: *I experience the 'kinesthetic signs' of sadness, as articulated on a performer's violin, therefore I feel sad*. One becomes a virtuoso concert violinist through the mastery of such signs, signs handed down and modified through traditions of violin playing and listening. In short, the nub of Cumming's analysis is that an affectively-compelling recital of any given musical work does not come about from factors prior to, but is achieved through mastery of, semiosis.

In our context: the act of focusing attention upon, and so encouraging students' discrimination in relation to, the specific signs in our vocal codes for conveying emotion and drama is something like clarifying those students' 'technical means for producing expressive sound' thereby, for themselves (Cumming 2000: 8). It is to acquaint them with the very means of the artistry one might project into a recital. I underline, in expounding Cumming's semiotic analysis, that over ten years of assessing recitals in tutorials, I saw nothing like the extraordinary advance in abilities consequent upon students' being encouraged to discuss and workshop the elements of each other's recitals. Their performances became richer in personality, by way of technical and evaluative discussion of signs.

But in some ways that outcome is just obvious. The fallacy is to imagine that reflexive, technical thinking is somehow not present in the moment of creative inspiration. Cumming insists that it is:

To be engaged in an act of performance that requires the exercise of highly developed skills is neither to assume a state of forgetfulness towards one's own bodily actions, nor to be absorbed by consciousness of them. (Cumming 2000: 35)

Only, as the other half of this quote makes clear, it is equally imperative that the reflexive thinker retreat somewhat. It is like, Cumming adds, what happens when acting.

She proceeds to quote Richard Schechner on what differentiates a rampaging elephant in a circus from Laurence Olivier shouting 'Down, Strumpet!' at Desdemona as 'he takes up the pillow to murder' her. The difference is that part of Olivier:

knows he is just acting and as such controls his gestures so that he does not injure the actress playing Desdemona. Even more, Olivier feels and does not feel rage against the actress. (Schechner in Cumming 2000: 35)

Olivier has clearly 'put aside his character as a person external to the play' to take up the role. But he 'does not thereby lose his capacity to monitor the violent gestures he is enacting' (Cumming 2000: 35). Schechner refers to this monitoring agency as an 'I' (Cumming 2000: 35). It can, Cumming continues

commonly be recognized by an actor engaged in reflection, after an experience. It is known in looking back that a degree of control was enforced by the "self," even though the self who was fully engaged in the act of monitoring could not, in the process, also reflect on its own activities. The "I" (eye) at its centre is blind – as Victor Frankl put it so neatly. I *am* in an act of which I cannot be self-reflexively aware until it is over. I *am* in a moment of risk and its monitoring, as the subject of more than one level of consciousness. (Cumming 2000: 36)

Cumming's Schechner-based analysis is illuminating, on a number of levels. Firstly, it pinpoints the agency that can, for all the spontaneity of emotion in performance, be trained outside performance in the discriminations such complex and instant action requires: it is that part of the performer that is caught up, as part of Olivier must have been when playing Othello, in the task of 'performing-the-actions-that-communicate-to-himself-and-to-his-audience-the-emotions-required' (Schechner in Cumming 2000: 35). Secondly, the analysis shows that this same, educable, eminently discursive agency (the actor's 'knowing half', as Schechner calls it), can only function at the price of its owner's relinquishing other forms of control in the moment. Cumming thus highlights that performance is *at once* something we can learn to do better *and* a moment of radical risk. It is a risk, each and every time, because it involves relinquishing control to an educable I that nonetheless 'at its centre is blind'.

Actor, director and MP Augusto Boal puts it this way: 'Every time an actor plays a character, *he or she plays it for the first and last time*. Like we play every minute of our own lives' (Boal 2002: 38). Is this blindness not at the root of theatre itself?

Further, isn't that why the experience of it is often so shattering of our commonplaces? Berkoff again:

I expect that what people mean when they say that an actor has danger is that he does what is unexpected; or, in other words, he is not programmed by the simple responses and conditioning that makes us familiar with what he will do... [He] somehow takes us in leaps and bounds to the unexpected since he is releasing the passion that is revolutionary. (Berkoff 1989: 38)

Again and again from actors, directors and students of theatre, this theme of the recital that is nonetheless originating. Herbert Blau: 'What you're looking for is the work which, if it isn't reflecting new conditions of existence (perhaps because suspicious of the reflections), is nevertheless determined to shake up the unchangeable' (Blau 1982: 26). Petr Bogatyrev: 'One of the most important and fundamental features of the theatre is *transformation*' (Bogatyrev 1976: 51). We are, in other words, sidling right up to Mayakovsky, and the very things I stated my unit was valorizing in composition: surprise, risk, originality. I hasten at this juncture to add the most important thing of all: what also vastly improved over the semester I have been discussing were my students' own original poetic compositions, relative to all prior years of teaching the unit. They had surprise.

I cannot see any cause for this other than the introduction of peer-generated feedback on recitals. At which the broader question all these reflections have been tending toward returns: are original composition and reciting others' poems at core all that dissimilar?

The idea of an identity between the two would put an interesting light on the question whether we can teach people to be poets. For we can certainly teach them to act. Consider in this regard the resonance of Petrucci's 'Holding the thought' exercise with what Medbh McGuckian wrote me from Belfast when I interviewed her (via email) earlier this year. She was responding to my asking whether sight or sound felt uppermost in the process of composing her verse:

I believe what happens is what Baudelaire and the symbolists described as association of senses, where a sixth sense is aroused that contains all the others but is a single sensation of learned experience. So they all act as one the words react

against and with each other to create a cinematic reality maybe stronger than reality in that it doesn't fade, but stays crystallised in the amber of the words like the Grecian Urn. (McGuckian, interview, email of 19 February 2015)

These comments are not, note, about recital, but about original composition – the composition of poems as dizzyingly new as McGuckian's. But there seems a strong resonance between the 'association of senses' she describes and Petrucci's reference to a reciter's getting 'utterly inside the text' all the same.

7 Coda

In the sequel to this article, I will address the archive of interviews I have conducted on questions of practice with twenty-eight poets from Australia, the USA and the UK over these last eight years. It indicates a broad and at times explicit support for the analogies I have been drawing over this piece. But it also suggests that composition and acting are dissimilar in at least one crucial respect: revision. As those same twenty-eight poets have almost without exception stressed (McGuckian is that exception), a first composition is invariably supplemented by painstaking, later revisions. I will cite a number of those responses in the paper, focusing on my interlocutors' responses to the following question: what does one revise towards? The answer will be something like the following: one revises towards a poem that feels like it is being thought and felt through in the moment.

Notes

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[2] I have not been able to locate the Russian original to determine if the gendering is Mayakovsky's. It could be, but is by no means necessarily so (Russian generalizes in a quite different fashion to English). [return to text](#)

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Paul Magee has published widely across a number of scholarly fields, including creative writing scholarship, psychoanalysis, postcolonial studies and Marxian thought. Paul teaches poetry and criticism at the University of Canberra, where he is Associate Professor.

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General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au