SPEAKING FOR PERFORMANCE / WRITING WITH THE VOICE

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1. Speech is not writing by the body. Writing is signs of speech.

Orpheus' decapitated head, torn from his body by the female followers of the cult of
Dionysos (the dark, the senses, life and death), was the book. Follower of Apollo (the
light, the eye, the mind), the techné of his thought could remain after him, speaking as it
rolled. In being separated from his body, it became the made thing, the defiance of death.
It is the memory of speech, or the forecast of its possibility. Speech that imitates writing
is papery.[1]

Performance is in some ways the opposite of the book. The book is mobile. Performance
is in place and time.

Conventionally, writing for performance is texted on the page to be recreated outside of
that space, in time, spoken. Creating for speaking, through, from and for performance
but without writing, is texted upon, with and for time, by the body. The body is always in
time. Unlike the page, unlike the reading mind, speaking for performance can hardly
avoid being simultaneous with its cotextual speeches. Its structures are those of the

voice, and the play and clash of voices. Its orality, however, is today not pre-scriptural. It can be informed by the memory of writing, or perhaps of the forecast of its possibility.

This article will describe and discuss a practice I have used for creating text for performance without writing[2]. This is a subjective account.

2. Creating through speaking

I began speaking into a recording device as a way of bypassing the experience of living through the blanks, the as yet unfilled pages, that are always part of the writing experience, and that are collapsed for the reader. The equivalent is a blank on the recording (possibly the on/off click of the pause button, otherwise the duration of the sound of breathing), but lived thinking in time rather than confronted as a visibly unchanging space, the mirror of non-production[3].

The practice was a form of discovery before it was a method of generating 'text'. But gradually what I was discovering was the range of means within it that made it most suited to how I wanted to relate to language, to think in language, and to be in a process of decision-making about language.

I had a history of improvisational methods of generating language in performance, as distinguished from character-based or situation-based speech, so this new approach was

more about thinking through speech than about enactment of speech, though that did also come into play as described below in terms of multiple voice.

The first few tries represent a progression of experiments: from simply reporting the scenes before the inner eye, hypnogogic imagery, to finding included in the visual fields fragments of language, morphemes which in turn began trains of meaning, to hearing such fragments, to interrogating these, to fully fledged dialogue, to multiple voices.

Regarding the dialogic, an aspect of the method may be represented by the following: in the 90s I had translated Kleist's 'On the gradual production of thought by speaking.'   For Kleist the presence of an addressee is important:

> There lies a special source of inspiration for him who speaks, in a
>
> human countenance facing him; and a gaze that lets us know that it
>
> has already understood a half-expressed thought, often offers us
>
> the expression for the entire remaining half.

While the recording device may not offer us a return expression (and I've written elsewhere about the speaker/ listener or performer/ audience relation), it is a less far stretch of the imagination for me to address a possible presence by speaking than by writing.   But it was in particular the title of his essay that interested me.

As 'voices' or trains of thought replied to or interrupted each other, I wanted to give as many as possible of them room, despite the singleness in time of my speaking voice. Distinguishing 'speakers' came later, in the editing process, sometimes to 'make' a sense, although sometimes this was clear.

And so this practice goes beyond a field recording of myself, to a dialogue with the situation of recording.

At the level of the texture of the language, both language and thought seemed to be inventing themselves and each other. Above all, the experience of the process remains one of choices. While sometimes known features of oral poems came naturally, like rhythmic patterning, I could also conversely choose, at each juncture, to make a different kind of choice to those I had made till then. Then there was a new patterning, of the new and the known. This is a process familiar in experimental improvised music.

In a process where what has been made so far is less readily checked than on the page, different syntaxes evolve as well as different leaps of thought. Memory is functioning differently. At times the process is even amnesiac[4], allowing the next point to be fully present. But at others, the sentence, if it is a sentence, is woven out of the cadences and clauses of breath and thought.

I would distinguish this practice from notions of automatic writing. In the generated parts of the language, the absence of the visual page allowed a different concentration,

lived in silence not in blank. I was involved in and aware of the intense mental activity of most of these silences – they are suspensions into silence, not falling silent as a disappearance or end to thought. Often the cadence would remain lifted, the effort is audible in the voice, a word continued several minutes later after multiple silent expansions sideways from the crossroads of possibilities. The trope may not be unfamiliar to any writer, but here the journey was not from my mind to its expression via my hands, but via the more intimate organ of my mouth.

I was involved in how expression had to occur through an articulation of the embodied voice, the lips, tongue, sound and intimate movement; how sometimes this would even linger in the lallation[5] of effort of mind, the mind's trying to meet directly what it holds in its eye or the form it perceives, and the expression not being the faithfully teleported recreation of that onto the other bank, but the product of that meeting. Such forms might also include themselves the meetings of forms and thoughts and the meetings of phonetic responses.

The lacunae could represent, not a specific absence or omission, but a moment of thought, either too quick to record, or passing through territory that might not have been explored as the straightest journey to the page.

In a less discursive piece of speaking I might have described there (there being a moment, one of those lacunae that I can only tell you happened in the brief paragraph blank before this sentence) some feature of the landscape that struck me as I made my specific way

along. Not a chance feature necessarily, though it might be, but perhaps also a feature conjured by the road.

And, unlike on the page that these texts found their way to in the editing process, silence returns in performance. In performance, silence is both the most and the least sensual part of speaking. The last because silence may be flesh closing upon itself while thought takes place, takes its place, and the most because in silence, the voice of the rest of the body can turn up the volume.

3. Speaking in time, speaking against time

a dead man talking, a dead foot walking[6]

In rows, on shelves: voices. Or voices stilled between closed covers, to speak when the covers are opened, to speak in the head or to speak in the mouth in an extraordinary ventriloquism across time. *I am thinking that thought, that exact thought that was thought before.* Or at least the form of that thought, its content re-coloured by now and by who I am. A time travel specifically permitted through the removal of the audible voice.

Like skulls in a crypt.

The book was both sinister and mobile, to be feared (West, 1984). The cult of Orpheus was a cult in fact not of the lyric song but of communication with the dead, a shamanic cult.

In this respect I want to mention two poets with whom in the work created by this form of speaking-as-writing I register affinity.

Alice Notley may, for all I know, sit in front of a paper or electronic page to write such works as *The Descent of Alette* (1996), but I was startled when I first found that on the published page (as opposed to either the writing page or the spoken recording), our texts looked the same: a series of small fragments of language made discrete by quotation marks.[7] Notley says that her use of the quotation mark is to separate the units of language, whereas for me they were to denote units of citation, the fact that I felt I was reproducing received language rather than simply generating it through distanced rational thought.

In Notley's *In the Pines* (2007), the conversation takes place between corpses. In the Descent of Alette, the speaker, if there is one, discourses with and/or listens to, her dead father. The title is reminiscent of the Ancient Mesopotamian poem *The Descent of Innana to Hell* (1997), a journey to the afterworld or underworld, where Innana goes to recover her dead brother/companion Dumuzi. Notley has survived the deaths of two poet husbands, Ted Berrigan and Douglas Oliver. I would not draw conclusions as to similarities between Notley's methodology and mine. My observations are particularly

about the layering of subject within subject, and the connotations of descent through such layers.

On the cover of Hannah Weiner's book *Clairvoyant Journal* (1978), is a picture of the author, on whose forehead is written 'I SEE WORDS'. In the texts of that period, the typed text is retained in publication, as Weiner uses it to represent the interruption of one phrase or word by another, one voice by another, usually hers by others. The text is interspersed with direct speech: 'appease us'. 'GO, HANNAH', etc. In her later *We Speak Silent* (1997), lines are prefaced, play-like, by what appear to be the names of speakers – fellow poets, Bob Dylan, a polar bear, her mother, the living and the dead. In both books, these speakers (or voices, or units of language, or linguistic/performative positions) address her, reflect on and instruct the writing, even appear occasionally as physical descriptions, as seen. Occupation of this space, these language/subject places, is fluid, these times simultaneous. Something similar can be said of the non-hierarchical juxtaposition of subject-matters: philosophy and the quotidian jostling for page-time. The work is grounded in the specificity of these voices, and her place in them. The work can be knowingly comic.[8] And in *Clairvoyant Journal*, her retorts speak from a writing self different to the writing, different to the written self, besides the rest. Her text is peopled, and the reader, to negotiate it, joins the throng. Weiner both sees and hears, not just in the mind's eye, or rather the mind's eye is active along with her bodily ones, and bodies and the world become pages. And the typographic surface of the book attempts to embody their differences – capitals, underlines, between the lines, erasures, handwriting, falling lines.

Although I am not directly talking about performance here – these last two writers are poets – they are far from the often assumed notion that poetry speaks from a unitary first-person subject-position. Rather than expressing thought, the position here is that language is active thought.

I've mentioned Weiner and Notley's work as examples of the specific power of language to traverse the boundaries between not only selves, but between the living and the dead, a power I previously connected to the book (Orpheus went to hell and back). And yet both poets' work lodges in multiplicity of voice, a performativity of the book.

4. Medead

The work I first made through the practice described in 2. above is *The Medead*, both the epic of Medea's journey, and Me Dead, another descent, out of self.

My interest in the mythic in the first place was partly linguistic. In writing or in poetry I had wanted, like the painter Elstir in Proust, 'to recreate things by removing their names' (Trans. Grieve, J.1999). And since myth has come to us through language on a journey that has ended clothed in caricature, I wanted to strip and respeak that language, to remove the garb of mystery (since it tends to be garb that mystery is wearing), and to speak and hear the strangeness and actualness of its body.

It was in fact specifically before the vastness of the material relevant to this myth that I abandoned the page. I needed to know differently, and to let that manifest differently.

Some of the text is in sentences, some in phrases, some in words, some in even smaller units. Some are great swathes. Some units are word-like, or amalgamations of words, some can barely claim to be phonemes. They are not neologisms that I expect or would like to become words, rather I kept some of these un-English passages because I felt that they are activities present in language, they are time present in language, they are the tips or chips of icebergs, the mind (as mine was) coming to speaking through movements of the vocal body.

It would be inappropriate to explicate my own work here, and it would not of course be possible to reproduce my work by using the practice of speaking into a tape recorder – the practice does not explain the work. Like any writing practice, my ability to make choices and the choices I make are informed, as an improvising musician distils into the present a history of practice and memory, and the future path of the experiment.

But to give technical examples forged by the process, in words like 'marrangement', 'interprenjoyment', the amalgams emerged from attempts to let two verbal directions take place simultaneously in the mouth.

The separation into speakers registered various main modes: figures in the narrative, the narrative itself, and commentary. On the page these divide as text, chorus and birds. Simultaneity in language was something I had for some time been striving for, as the voices in, say, a Mozart opera (or more, how Busoni seems to play two or more different works on the piano at the same time), but being able to write thinking all of them, not writing them as separate. This emerged naturally from the practice of speaking:

Theseus: trickles her

   Medea: lap drinks

   Aegeus: just one

   Chorus: *leans over*

   Medea: it's closer than you think

   Chorus: *she leans over*

   Medea: this was where to stop

                                       and me in it

                                       the black sea shits out of his

   Chorus: *so from his mouth*

scopes   *Birds:*

   Chorus: *different*

                        grunted

   Medea: voice

Theseus: meat what I am

The birds are separated as they treat their lines differently, can repeat, interrupt,

underscore, etc. The birds are not the only place of lallation, and in fact they are often

very coherent, like the birds of Scottish Mouth Music (Lomax, 1951). They might say,

      know he needs you he needs you he needs you

      know he needs you he needs you he needs you

and a person might say:

      guide pal

      body

      otis

      larming

      curse

      try

      passage

      war

mer

murse

There were occasions when I would come across a word or an idea when reading further relevant research, or I chanced to hear a word that I remembered having spoken in recording, though I hadn't known its meaning or sometimes even that it was a word or quite what it referred to. I would look it up, sometimes in an English, sometimes in a Greek dictionary, to find that it was absolutely relevant and exact. I don't think this was a mysterious process, but it certainly wasn't a fully conscious one. I had absorbed a quantity of material, but it was only through speaking that I had been able to bring it to the surface at the contextually accurate point.

The listening-back, then was another stage, a hearing. Sometimes I wondered what I had whispered, at other times had to whisper it again to know, or to know why.

Though it is my means, I also don't privilege here the speaking voice. Sign-language, for example, uses a system that, unlike our alphabet, which purely represents sounds, includes the representation of whole ideas. Aaron Williamson's work involves the whole body in what often might also be called a linguistic enterprise in performance. He assumes the fact of his deafness as a form of knowledge. His book, *Hearing Things* (2001)*,* is a transcription of performances originally recorded by speech-recognition software, although no recognizable speech occurred at the time, rather speech was created by the software in recognition of, for example, spluttering wax or moving furniture.

Though I describe in this article a practice of creating work that is later edited and expanded into the whole body and multiple persons, I've also used a similar method to improvise in actual performance. There I find my whole body does become involved, either in action begun as thought-impulses, or simply in the tensions, speeds, suspensions and turns of the movements of voice, mouth and thought.

I use a version of this too as the basis of an approach with actors to finding all that is in a text so generated, not to elide it into a norm of what it seems to say. In that process, the element of time re-inserts itself inside the words, the voices reclaim their separate spaces there, and the body reflects the play of their simultaneous differences.

But in performance, not that it has less patience for the silences, but revealing them and living them would in fact give the lie to the collapsing of the time of thinking that the suspension in a word or thought assumes, is working towards, in the recording. Unidirectional time is not in any case what is going on.

To prepare for my next performance, I'm learning ventriloquism. I'm also beginning to see what happens if I use the time of the silences as a rhythmic fact, as physical as the impulses of tongue or air. Many of the effects of ventriloquism, of course, could be achieved with technology in the finished product. But I'm for now less interested in audio recording as a substitute for the human voice than in the process of dialogue between them.

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[1] In Dutch an over-literary playtext is *papierig*, literally *papery*.)

[2] I am distinguishing between performativity and embodiment, and also between the privately and publicly enacted.

[3] This characterization of a blank on the page is the opposite of the active blank space in, for example, Larry Eigner's or Anne-Marie Albiach's writing.

[4] I had begun an interest in this phenomenon in writing in *Cells of Release*, an installation of writing on a continuous strip of paper, because the spatial linearity of the work did not allow the cross-checking made easy by the back-and-forth weaving of lines on a page.

[5] I use the term *Lallation* for syllabic repetition, as in infant utterances sometimes thought of as pre-linguistic, or as a form of vocal musical production: 'lallation [n. of action f. L. lallare to "sing lalla or lullaby" (Lewis & Sh.) F.] †childish utterance.' The Oxford English Dictionary (1999)

[6] from Jesurun, J. *Philoktetes* PAJ Publications, New York.

[7] These quotation marks were a form I abandoned later when I stopped distinguishing between the sources of the language in favour of attending to and making choices because of what was happening within it – or maybe this would be better described as letting and making what was happening within it through a series of choices. And at the time not all of the text is in quotes, as not all was 'heard' or 'read' in the mind's ear and eye, but I gave equal value to the volitionally generated and the apparently received.

[8] The comedy of this saying-and-not-saying brings up Weiner's contemporary and champion Charles Bernstein, master of the place of the ironic voice, who, when he writes the most apparently naïve of poetry, positions himself with the ultimate irony (I thank Drew Milne for pointing out that this is opposite or perhaps akin to the Scottish colloquial use of 'double irony,' saying what you mean as if you didn't) in saying that he meant every word of it. This relation with the words that one says, as if not necessarily being the things that one is saying, is a theatrical position, and yet, one says them. This digression into irony is because irony is a voice. In some ways, returning to the image of the poet at her or (in this case, his) desk, one can imagine an almost theatrical activity on

the part of the writer surveying over there on the page what he is enacting saying. Maybe the fact that the transparency of the written voice is at issue, is the flip-side of the choice not to write but to speak.