Richard Outram and the Poet's Voice: Elocution and Reading Aloud

by Robert Einarsson

Presented in the Department of English Speakers Series at Grant MacEwan University, on October 21, 2009.

> I have just heard a poem spoken with so delicate a sense of its rhythm, with so perfect a respect for its meaning, that if I were a wise man and could persuade a few people to learn the art I would never open a book of verses again. (W. B. Yeats, "Speaking to the Psaltery," 17)

When we prepare to read a text aloud, we necessarily ask ourselves how the text would be spoken if it were spoken language and not in written form. More often than not, our goal is to "Speak so naturally that your words may go from the heart to the heart, and that people may forget the messenger while they listen to the message" (Fleming 5, quoted in Morrison para 8). The "natural" reading is our target. But what does this mean? And in particular what does it mean in reading literature, a form which often may be better characterized as artificial and not natural? In 1897, elocutionist Alfred Ayres made the following observation about accomplishing the natural voice within the artistic form:

> All that is necessary in order to read well, is to speak naturally, but naturalness of all things is the most difficult to attain. Anyone that can draw at all can draw something that would be readily recognized as an attempt to draw the human figure, but to draw the human figure so that it is true to Nature one must be a superb artist. (73)

To uncover the reading by which the text can sound the most natural requires artifice, art, structure. Robert Frost makes a statement about his own practice as a writer in relation to the natural voice. Writing, according to Frost, is nothing more or less than speaking on paper:

> What I have been after from the first, consciously and unconsciously, is tones of voice. I've wanted to write down certain brute throat noises so that no one could miss them in my sentences.
>
> The living part of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the syntax and idiom and meaning of a sentence. (quoted in Sergeant, 423)

But the question "how should this text be read aloud?" is a vexed question, because, while there is one way to write a word, there are many ways to say it, and no two readers can seem to agree. To avoid seeming dogmatic, we hesitate to say that there is only one correct reading. But on the other hand, we would also hesitate to say that there are no constraints at all on vocal interpretation, that analysis is an unguided free-for-all. Fortunately, there is a tradition of very humane and sensitive texts, on the subject known as elocution, which treats the subject of the vocal interpretation, and which gives, if not iron-clad rules, then at least some guiding principles, as to how we ought to shape our vocal interpretation of a text. In my reading of the elocutionary tradition, I can discover five such principles.

The first of these can be called "the recitation principle." This principle makes a distinction between reading aloud, i.e. reciting, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, dramatic rendition. In reciting a poem, one does not take on characterization the way that an actor does in drama. William Butler Yeats explains that a reciter should not exhibit characterization when reading poetry, not even when reading actual drama:

> Modern recitation is not, like modern theatrical art, an over elaboration of a true art, but an entire misunderstanding. It has no tradition at all. It is an endeavour to do what can only be done well by the player. It has no relation of its own to life. Some young man in evening clothes will recite to you the Dream of Eugene Aram, and it will be laughable, grotesque and a little vulgar. Tragic emotions that need scenic illusions, a long preparation, a gradual heightening of 478 emotion are thrust into the middle of our common affairs. . . . He will gesticulate wildly, adapting his movements to the drama as if Eugene Aram were in the room before us, and all the time we see a young man in evening dress who has become unaccountably insane. (479)

> The minstrel never dramatized anybody but himself. It was impossible from the nature of the words the poet had put into his mouth or that he had made for himself, that he should speak as another person. He will go no nearer to drama than we do in daily speech and he will not allow you for any long time to forget himself. . . . (479)

While avoiding dramatization, the reciter should nevertheless read with a marked respect for the import and weight of such a text as poetry:

> The reciter cannot be a player, for that is a different art; but he must be a messenger, and he should be as interesting, as exciting, as are all that carry great news. He comes from far off, and he speaks of far off things with his own peculiar animation; and instead of lessening the ideal and beautiful elements of speech, he may, if he has a mind to, increase them. . . . His art is nearer to pattern than that of the player; it is always allusion, never illusion; for what he tells of, no matter how impassioned he may become, is always distant; and for this reason he may permit himself every kind of nobleness. ("Literature and the Living Voice, 1906, 479)

Avoiding characterization is one principle of elocutionary recitation.

A second elocutionary principle may be termed "natural speech." Instead of a dramatic rendition, reciters seek what elocutionists have described as naturalness in the reading voice. This is Alfred Ayres expressing the moral value of natural speech, leading to genuine community between the reader and the listener:

> Natural tones are the tones of truth and honesty, of good sense and good taste. It is with them only that the understanding is successfully addressed; with them only that we can arouse and keep awake the intelligence of the listener, which is the object we always have in view, whether we speak our own language or that of another. (26)

Since the poet is seeking, in the words of Robert Frost, to inscribe a real voice, to "write down certain brute throat noises so that no one could miss them;" it is therefore, in turn, the reciter's job to discover these sounds and utter them as a speaker would actually say them, were they a first-hand utterance. This is the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan writing in 1787:

> And as it is certain that Nature, if left to herself, directs everyone in the right use of emphasis when they utter their own immediate feelings, they will have the same unerring rule to guide them in uttering the words of others after they have been written down . . . . at every sentence, let them ask themselves this question. How should I utter this, were I speaking it as my own immediate sentiments? (105-106)

> Everyone who understands what he reads, cannot fail to find out each emphatic word; and his

> business then is to mark it properly, not by stress only, as in accented syllables, but by a change of note, suited to the matter, which constitutes the essence of emphasis. If it be asked how the proper change of note is always to be hit upon, my answer is, that he must not only understand, but feel the sentiments of the author; as all internal feeling must be expressed by notes, which is the language of emotions; not words, the language of ideas. (Sheridan, 103-104)

(In mentioning "notes . . . the language of emotions," Sheridan is making the observation, well known to elocutionists, that tone of voice is a universal language: we can gather the nature of a conversation in a language that we don't understand, or one heard in a muffled way through the wall to a neighbouring room, even when we can't make out the words themselves. Animals, as well, can understand tone of voice instinctively, and we in turn can understand their vocal and body language, suggesting that this dimension of language is of a different order than regular lexical content.)

This is Alfred Ayres on the elocutionary theme of naturalness:

> Soon after the Shakespeare reading, a young woman of winsome mien read a poem and read it with much intelligence. She seemed simply to have set herself the task of letting her auditors know what it was about, and this she did successfully. Her methods were direct and natural, without any apparent effort to be effective. I heard no one at the convention that pleased me more . . . . (69-70)

> The most difficult thing to learn in reading is properly to distribute the time, to be deliberate, to pause frequently and naturally. . . . Pausing properly does more than anything other one thing to make one's reading natural and realistic. (73-74)

Naturalness will result in another goal of the elocutionists, namely, ease of listening. The natural reading will unburden the listener of all difficulty and doubt, resulting in a completely effortless activity. Alfred Ayres describes this quality:

By the use of accent and emphasis, words and their meaning, being pointed out by certain marks at the same time as they are uttered, the hearer has all trouble saved except but that of listening; and can accompany the speaker at the same pace that he goes, with as clear a comprehension of the matter offered to his consideration, as the speaker himself has, if he delivers himself well.

The third elocutionary principle can be termed minimalism: the reader should emphasize only those words and syllables which are definitely required to be emphasized. In other words, if a stress is optional, it should be left out. In medicine they say "do no harm;" with recitation, it is the same: unless an emphasis or pause is definitely indicated, it should be left neutral as to stress. The elocutionist Alfred Ayres says "In practicing remember: . . . To be chary of emphasis. Never emphasize a word unless you think the sense demands it. . . . Do nothing without a reason" (26). Elocutionists base this principle on the argument that it is the job of the reciter to assist the listener in processing the underlying information of a complex text. We should read in a way that makes the grammar easier, not harder, for the listener to process. The listener is, after all, at the mercy of the reader in a vocal performance, and may be trying to understand a difficult text while hearing it for the very first time. Every emphasis brings in another layer of meaning. Hence, no emphasis should be introduced unless definitely necessary. Ayres gives an interesting example of the minimalist principle in his analysis of the famous line from The Merchant of Venice , "The - quality - of - mercy - is - not - strained":

> Thoughtless readers, who comprise fully forty-nine in every fifty, are sure to make either *quality* or *mercy*, or possibly both emphatic, while the thoughtful reader sees that the making of either of

these words emphatic puts a meaning into the line not intended. To say that "The *quality* of mercy is not strained" is to say that some other attribute of mercy is, or may be, strained – the quantity, for example. And to say, "The quality of *mercy* is not strained" is to say that the quality of something else is, or may be, strained. The thoughtful reader sees that Portia says simply this: "Mercy doesn't come by compulsion, it comes of itself, it is spontaneous," and, having seen this, he has no difficulty in deciding how the line should be emphasized.

[The quality of mercy is not *strained*,

It *droppeth* as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath...] (29)

An example (from Richard Outram's poem, "Summer Morning") would be the clause "I watch you." I would argue that the correct reading is to *give* an accent on the word "watch" alone, and not on "you," i.e., "I watch you."

First, the accent on "watch" is mandatory. You can't say "*I* watch *you*," with "watch" being totally without accent. So you have to accent at least the word "watch": "I *watch* you."

Now, an accent on "you" would be optional. You could say either "I *watch* you," or "I watch <u>*you*</u> ." "I *watch* you" expresses simply the act of watching, whereas "I <u>*watch you*</u> " signifies an additional layer of meaning, that I watch you in particular and not some other person: "I watch you ." Thus, the emphasis on "you" would add a layer of meaning, a complication, that is unnecessary and possibly confusing. According to elocutionary doctrine, then, the stress on "you" should be omitted, and it should read "I *watch* you, *watching* . . . . " Of course, the option is open to any reader to interpret the line in the other way: "I watch *you*, watching." But an elocutionist would tell us not to add meaning unnecessarily, because doing so makes the text more complicated for the listeners to process. At the same time, added stresses draw attention away from the text and onto the interpretation. Our job as vocal readers, then, is to strip down the text so as to make it as easy as possible for the listener to process. That is the theory I am following in this presentation.

One elocution text (Karr 438-439) presents an example sentence that changes meaning with each choice of emphasis. The sentence is "I - said - he - was - a – scoundrel." Options for emphasis are the following:

I said he was a scoundrel. (I, not someone else)

I *said* he was a scoundrel. (a repetition)

I said *he* was a scoundrel. (he, not someone else)

I said he *was* a scoundrel. (in contradiction to *was not*)

I said he was | a *scoundrel*. (a scoundrel, not a creep)

I said he was a *scoundrel*. (simple emphasis)

The last reading is the most forceful: I said he was a scoundrel. In this reading there are no extra implications or distractions, and the depth of disdain comes across with particular force. The most simple reading also turns out to be the most forceful and emphatic.

The next, fourth, principle is to use stress to highlight contrasts. In the example above from The Merchant of Venice, the contrast is between constraint and freedom: The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth . . . .” An example from one of Richard Outram’s poems is the first few lines of his poem on the “Bittersweet” tree, part of his Arbour sequence: “The more we take, | in every lengthened year, / Of your stained fruit, || the more you branch and bear . . . .” And a famous example is the Shakespeare sonnet in which we have a series of contrasts:

> Shall I compare *thee* | to a Summer’s *day?* |
>
> Thou art *more* lovely | and *more* temperate: |
>
> *Rough* winds | do shake | the darling buds of May, |
>
> And Summer’s lease | hath all too *short* a date: |
>
> Sometime *too* hot | the eye of heaven shines, |
>
> And *often* | is his gold complexion dimm’d; |
>
> And every fair | *from* fair | sometime declines, |
>
> By chance | or nature’s changing course *untrimm’d*: |
>
> But *thy* eternal Summer shall not fade |
>
> Nor lose possession | of that fair *thou* owest; |
>
> Nor | shall Death brag | thou wanderest in his shade, |
>
> When in eternal lines to time thou growest. |
>
> So long as men can breathe, | or eyes can see, |
>
> So long lives this, || and this | gives *life* | to thee.

The fifth and final principle of reading aloud is to use stress to make the grammatical connections clear. This rule rests upon the desire for clarity and ease of listening which is our goal for any recited text. In Richard Outram’s “Summer Morning,” the “solitary tern” should be emphasized. This is to help the listener form the bridge from the word “watching,” to that which is being watched, namely the “tern,” which is a bridge that crosses over considerable interposed text:

> I watch you | <u>watching</u>| in the mesh of light
>
> Upon the ceiling, | with a little frown |
>
> Of ardour, | it may be, | a sudden | white |
>
> Solitary <u>tern</u> | untangle down |

And plummet | with a distant | strident cry . . . .

The reader needs to emphasize “watching” and “tern” in order to make the grammatical connection clear.

The relationship between the written text and the living voice is profound. The prose writer Eudora Welty confirms the importance of a speaking voice even in a written text:

Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn’t hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn’t my mother’s voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers – to read as listeners – and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. Whether I am right to trust so far I don’t know. By now I don’t know whether I could do either one, reading or writing, without the other.

My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice. *(11-12)*

The success of any piece of writing depends on achieving an overall structure with rhythmical closure, both within sentences and across sentences to the paragraph. Rhythm creates voice, and voice creates personality. Only writing that implies a speaker can embody personality, and create communion with the reader. It is up to the reciter to reflect this vocal quality in reading aloud. Once again this is W. B. Yeats:

I owe to Chaucer many truths, but I would add to those truths the certainty that all the old writers wrote to be spoken or sung, and in a later age to be read aloud, for hearers who gave up nothing of life to listen, but sat, the day’s work over, friend by friend, lover by lover. (Yeats, “Literature and the Living Voice”)

To conclude, I would like to present a contemporary sonnet, “Summer Morning,” in which Outram is able both to fulfill the strict requirements of the sonnet form, and at the same time to capture a fully contemporary poetic voice. Including secondary accents in the scansion, the following poem presents iambs for all but three of its seventy metrical feet. However, its thirteen secondary accents act to mute the iambic form, and its four run-on lines contribute to this effect. Furthermore, the phonological phrases most often divide the iambs in half, further muting the iambic regularity, and producing, upon the whole, a finished piece which is both an exemplary case of the rigid sonnet form, and yet an example of a fully contemporary late Twentieth-Century speaking voice:

- / - | / - | \ - / | - / |

I watch you watching in the mesh of light

- / | - / - | \ - / - / |

Upon the ceiling, with a little frown

- / - | \ - / | - / - | / |

Of ardour, it may be, a sudden white

/ - \ - / | - / - / |

Solitary tern untangle down

- / - | \ - / - | / - / |

And plummet with a distant strident cry

/ - | - / - / - | \ - / |

Into the molten surface, like a knife

/ | - / | - / - \ - / |

Plunged: and rise and powerfully fly

- / | \ / - / - | \ - / |

With one quicksilver sliver of a life,

- / - | \ - / - \ | - / |

Just perfect in its valiancy and thrust,

- / - | \ - / | - / - / |

Now broken in that bright rapacious beak:

- / | - / - | / | - / | - /→

And see the curtain stir: and know we must

- / - / - / | \ | / - | / |

Forbear perfection yet; nor, creature, seek

- / - | / - | / | \ / - / |

To fathom ever our death-bright descent

- / - / - | \ - / - /

And resurrection in this element.

In this poem, lines eleven and twelve contain the most prominent iambic sequence, and prepare the poem for its closure in the final couplet. The rhythm expands in the phrases “Forbear perfection yet” and “And resurrection | in this element.” In spite of the accurate, indeed rigorous adherence to prosodic form, the sonnet uses such phrases to convey a decidedly natural poetic speaking voice. To conclude where I

began, I repeat the statement by Alfed Ayres about accomplishing the natural voice within the artistic form:

> All that is necessary in order to read well, is to speak naturally, but naturalness of all things is the most difficult to attain. Anyone that can draw at all can draw something that would be readily recognized as an attempt to draw the human figure, but to draw the human figure so that it is true to Nature one must be a superb artist. (73)

Works Cited

Ayres, Alfred. *The Essentials of Elocution*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1897.

Fleming, Canon James. *The Art of Reading and Speaking* , 2nd ed. New York: Edward Arnold, 1896.

Karr, Harrison M. *Developing Your Speaking Voice.* New York: Harper & Row, 1953..

Langer, Suzanne K. *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Morrison, Mark. "Performing and the Pure Voice: Elocution, Verse Recitation, and Modernist Poetry in Prewar London. *Modernism/Modernity* 3.3 (1996) 25-50.

Outram, Richard. "Bittersweet." *The Promise of Light.* Toronto: Anson-Cartwright Editions, 1979, p. 110.

----------."On a Silver Field." *Exultate, Jubilate*. Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1966, p.12.

----------. "Passes of a Bright Hand." *Exultate, Jubliate*. Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1966, p. 13.

----------. "Summer Morning." *The Promise of Light.* Toronto: Anson-Cartwright Editions, 1979, p.

Sergeant, Elizabeth. *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*. Holt, 1960.

Sheridan, Thomas. *Lectures on the Art of Reading*. London: J. Dodsley, 1781. Rpt. Bristol: Thommes Press, 2003.

Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. Poetic Closure: *A Study of How Poems End*. University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Yeats, William Butler. "Literature and the Living Voice." *The Contemporary Review* 90 (1906) 472-82.

Yeats, William Butler. "Speaking to the Psaltery." *Ideas of Good and Evil.*

Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginnings*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.