

DISTANT READING

PERFORMANCE,
READERSHIP, AND
CONSUMPTION IN
CONTEMPORARY
POETRY

PETER MIDDLETON

Distant Reading

Performance, Readership, and
Consumption in Contemporary Poetry

PETER MIDDLETON

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS
Tuscaloosa

Copyright © 2005
The University of Alabama Press
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0380
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America

Typeface: Minion

∞

The paper on which this book is printed meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Science-Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Middleton, Peter, 1950-

Distant reading : performance, readership, and consumption in contemporary poetry / Peter Middleton.

p. cm. — (Modern and contemporary poetics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8173-1442-3 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8173-5151-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Authors and readers—United States—History—20th century. 3. Books and reading—United States—History—20th century. 4. Performing arts—United States—History—20th century. 5. Oral interpretation of poetry—History—20th century. 6. Experimental poetry, American—History and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PS325.M53 2004

811'.509—dc22

2004014701

Acknowledgments

Throughout the writing of these essays I have felt I was part of a growing conversation about a previously neglected area of the history of poetry, one largely taking place within the poetry scene in magazines and internet discussion lists, and even sometimes during the breaks at poetry readings, a conversation whose significance is now increasingly recognized by scholars. The essays in this book could not have been written without the support of editors who commissioned earlier versions of them (their names are listed at the end of the preface), those who invited me to give talks on these themes at several universities and conferences, and the support and conversation of colleagues at the University of Southampton and elsewhere. I would like to thank all those who read and commented on these essays at various stages of development, and I would like particularly to thank Charles Bernstein and Hank Lazer, the editors of this series, for extensive support, comment, conversation, and the inspiration of their own researches in the field of poetry performance and readership. Sabbatical leave from the University of Southampton and a grant for research on poetry performance from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), were both crucial for completion. Kate, Harriet, and George have been a great source of support and encouragement throughout. This book is dedicated to them.

The author and the University of Alabama Press gratefully acknowledge permission to use the following poems and extended passages:

x / Acknowledgments

From *Singularities*, copyright 1990 by Susan Howe and reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press. All rights reserved.

“Taxonomy” from *Shalers Fish*, Etruscan Books 2001 copyright. Helen Macdonald is quoted in full by permission of Etruscan Books. All rights reserved.

From *Mars Disarmed*, copyright 2001 Drew Milne and published by The Figures, Great Barrington Maine 2001. All rights reserved.

From *Poems*, published by Bloodaxe Books Ltd and Fremantle Arts Centre Press, copyright 1999 by J. H. Prynne, by permission of the author.

From the poem “Taliban Lamp-Post,” copyright 2000 by Rob MacKenzie, in *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985–2000*. Courtesy of Etruscan Books.

Preface

Poems are neither machines nor made of words, although William Carlos Williams understandably felt it necessary to call attention to such affinities by asserting an identity at a time when machines and language were turned into weapons on a worldwide scale. Nor is the poem pure energy or angelic vibrations heard only by the ideal inner senses that transcend historical contingency. The materialist vision of the poem makes it a verbal refrigerator, solid, enclosed, keeping its contents ready for consumption; the idealist turns the poem into an ether that trumps all other physical and metaphysical foundations. Versions of this polarization are endemic to our discourses of poetics, especially our theories of reading and reception. The problem is that poems are not like light, a wave or a particle depending on which way you look at them, they have several aspects. Poems can be manifested as heterogeneous material objects; they can be events in performance; their multiple versions, published copies, and performances cannot be located in any single point of space and time; and they are unusually complex mixtures of all the knowable and unknowable components of consciousness: primary process, reasoning, emotion, memory, and intersubjectivity. The assemblage of dictionary-given words into an optically compressed box of lines on a paper page is simultaneously an unbounded phenomenon extending across time, minds, objects, and meanings.

Reading the poem requires labors whose boundaries are not easily foretold. Poems have to be realized, rendered, performed, or as we ordinarily say, read, for their meaning to be produced (the uncertainty about whether it is more helpful to pluralize “meaning” is part of this prob-

lem), just as musical scores require instruments and players for their significance to be fully manifest. Poems exacerbate what most other kinds of text try to minimize: published or unpublished, the nonpoems are circulated with strong controls on pertinent reception that allow minimal opportunities for improvised responses. Popular novels, for instance, follow many strictly conventional story-telling rules so familiar they are largely invisible; letters are addressed to a particular recipient who is figured as standing by the periods of each sentence waiting to hear them; and scientific papers use a style as devoid of ambiguity as possible. Poems by contrast are deliberately made highly vulnerable to the instabilities of transmission by the intensification of the effects of language on ear, eye, thought, and feeling so that they can also explore, celebrate, and critique the intersubjectivity of language practice. Within small communities of readers, the specially controlled environment of the classroom, or a network of devoted scholars, the reading of a poem can nevertheless appear to be very similar to the translation of a text from a foreign language with the help of a dictionary. The poem seems in such situations to be a singular artifice out of which meaning can be distilled by patient exegesis, relying on the elucidation of reference, the analysis of rhetoric, and the investigation of its contingent biography and history. For many purposes this idealized model of reception works fine. It doesn't work so well for the study of contemporary poetry. These poems produce their meanings across networks of readers, performance, intertexts, and visual presentation, meanings that are not usually locatable in a singular, solitary encounter between one printed manifestation of the text and one sensitive reader.

Put simply, there are two reasons for this: the inherent instability of communication and the shaping effects of communicative technologies on the production of meaning. First, linguistic meaning is transactional and negotiable, not fixed in the sign or even in one discursive formation. Actual uses of language are interactive, and the meaning of what one person says to another is meaningful precisely because it is open to interpretation and misunderstanding. Communication is always unfinished, suggestive of further possibilities, and understanding one another is therefore also a form of work, whereby we add to and transform what the other says and draw out its possibilities. Writing, as Plato feared, only takes this condition further. Poems work simultaneously along axes of speech, writing, body, person, sociality, and abstraction (or artifice) that

enormously complicate these transformational negotiations because the artificial distinctions between meaning and naming, or meaning and extension, heuristic abstractions sometimes useful to philosophers, don't apply very closely to the actual practice of poetry reading.

Second, poems work at the limits of the technologies of language. Prosody, the use of print layout to create perceptual and cognitive codes, the use of fonts, folded paper bound together, audible voicing, recordings, digitization—this is only a short sample from a long list of the *techné* that poems work with. Almost every feature of language technologies has been put to use by poets as a formal device for the production of meaning, and these formal devices are themselves historically shaped and can sometimes even allude to that construction process as well. The poem on the page is impatiently waiting for its next staging in another technology, a new performance, or some other realization via formally marked interactions, and it is even waiting for the recognition of literary theorists, as the editor of the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out. He allows himself a note of frustration on this very theme in his entry on “Poetry” that carries special emphasis given the comprehensiveness of the reference work itself: “we are still very far from a full and satisfying exegesis of what an intricate complex of formal relations a poem is, and, concomitantly, what precisely is involved in a reader's cognition and interpretation of a poem” (Brogan 941). For once the collective pronoun really carries weight. He recognizes that the problem is partly that the term “reading” refers to several different moments of response—silent reading, reading aloud, and the back-and-forth process of interpretation—but doesn't go a step further and ask whether these formal relations might not be figures of social and historical relations. Without making this connection the significance of these formal relations will probably remain obscured and their visible markers irrelevant.

For many historical reasons, ranging from the legacies of genocide to the growth of universal literacy, social mobility, and many new modes of imaginative pleasure, the patterns of distribution of a poem's meanings across the world of readers have rapidly changed. The ethical urgencies of the visual immediacies created by the news media that have plenty of terrible and pressing material every year, and the vast social institutions dedicated to producing scientific truths of the material world, shrink the public space for the low-budget poet to offer counterbalancing

insights. The practice of poetry has changed radically: in the past fifty years the live poetry performance has become integral to the writing and reading of poetry; print layout has, over only a slightly longer period, created many new conventions and prosodic opportunities; and most powerful of all, and the most elusive to describe, social forms of poetry reception, the ways we collectively come to understand poems, have been transformed.

Poets of the past few decades have therefore had to think harder than ever about the means by which they launch their poems into the world of new technologies and cultures of communication. They are all too aware, for example, that most lyric poems written today are cushioned with popular music and published on CD or as internet MP3 files, and their visceral accompaniment easily drowns out textual limitations, and often promises effortless emotional rewards. Should poets take up performance themselves to gain readers? If they do, how much will success depend on voice training, the skills of performance art and theatre, the additional support of social and political passions co-opted for the occasion, and other features of public culture? These pressing questions are matched by the new challenges of publication. Will their readers know how to read their new (and traditional) poetic signs, their line-breaks, shifting margins, special punctuation, allusions, and rhetoric, when the poems are printed in magazines and books? If a reviewer says their poetry “is excruciating to follow, lacking . . . even the slightest pretence to logic and reality” and adds dismissively that “the audience for this kind of poetry is small” (Bartlett 126–27), as one said of Michael Palmer, is the answer to bring back logic and realism, or introduce help menus throughout the poem? Or should they follow Palmer’s lead and reply robustly that such poetry is not a “consumer item,” it requires “an effort of attention that is as active as that which goes into the writing?” It has become something of a commonplace that the more innovative forms of poetry require readers to be active, almost joint participants in the cultural work of the poem. Such attention requires collective organization, just as the performance does—an entire network of people who edit, publish, review, research, and teach the poetry, or even simply engage it with conversation and correspondence. And the cultural work of producing the meanings of the poem is shared out amongst them.

If all that was at issue here was the delivery of the poem into the hands and minds of readers, this would still be a major element in the making

of poetry. But the meaning of a poem is not already there latent in the pattern of words, as a dictionary definition is available as a ready equivalent of any ordinary word in circulation. The production of meaning by a poem is an intersubjective process extended over time, many individuals, and only ever partially available for cognitive reflection. The same network of publication, performance, and reception histories is the field where meaning is constantly in flux. Poets such as Palmer know this and compose with it. Just as a composer of music thinks about the sonic properties of instruments, the skills of performers, and possibly the acoustics of performance spaces, so too do poets anticipate the conditions under which their poems will be realized through the physical, emotional, and cognitive labor of an audience extended across time and space.

I argue in this book that many of the processes whereby poetry is performed, displayed in magazines, imperially controlled by the computer, read by consumers, printed on the page, or carefully labeled with anonymity-defying authorial names become integral to the possibility of meaning in contemporary poetry, and that our relative neglect of the significance of these activities is one cause of the continuing resistance to reading that Palmer mentions. All readership represents some effort, however much it can apparently be mitigated by the easy reading techniques developed by the poetry of entertainment and autobiography today (much of this poetry is actually a lot harder to read than it appears—if its complexities and confusions were better acknowledged its ascendancy would be more questioned), and this labor of reading can be considerable for the poetry of inquiry or extended imagination. Poetry communities instinctively know this: many poems are offered within networks that help organize their reception. Readerships do not spring into life as a new poem rains down upon them. They need training, they need to be brought into being as economies of affect, memory, and interpretation. Poets are extremely aware of this, as they are also aware that their writing has to try hard to be heard in public cultures where other forms of discourse and knowledge have far more legitimacy.

The first essay introduces these issues in terms of a metaphors of distance and biography, arguing that the temporal and other distances between reading and composition are active contributors to the work of the poem. Poems by John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara are traced across differing communities of reception represented by the magazines and

anthologies where they have been published in addition to their appearance in collections by the poets themselves. These poems owe their popularity to the way they anticipate cultural conflict and shifting constructions of poetic tradition. The following two essays stand at the center of the arguments within the book. They offer a theoretical and historical account of the modern poetry reading that reaches back into elided histories of elocution and rhetoric and questions the neglect of linguistic sound in literary theory. This research leads into arguments about the staging of authorship, the sounding and intersubjectivity of oral performance and then into the history of poetry, and into its future on computer and the internet. A talk on the first person in poetry was rewritten to become the essay “Anonymous Poetry,” making the original talk the object of several layers of reflexive commentary that enfold it like a triptych that becomes its own version of the long biography of the text.

The final four essays track different modes of reading and the formalisms that they engage with. “The Line-Break in Everyday Life” stages an experiment to see how much the activity of the active reader of poetry is reliant on emotional and symbolic investments in the material form of a text. “The New Memoryism” starts with the observation that computers have changed the way most Westerners with access to at least a modest degree of financial support communicate with one another, as well as becoming the standard tools for writing. Have they also affected the way we read poetry or made more visible what were somewhat hidden parts of the processes of readership? The essay takes up these questions in the context of the recent surge of interest in memory as a base for individual and national identity. “Dirigibles” is a series of fragments or writing balloons that steer through the ins and outs of textual exegesis in modernist poetics and use the recent controversy about the leading British poet J. H. Prynne as a test case for study of the tensions between poetic difficulty and the institutions of explication. The final essay addresses that target of Michael Palmer’s dislike, the reader as consumer. Stephen Vincent dismisses poetry that is written just to make an immediate impact as performance in front of a large audience, saying that “the work tended to become a commodity that the audience devoured and forgot” (51). What do such metaphors of consumption tell us about our uses of poetry? This concluding essay starts with an autobiographical dilemma manifested as a problem with the literal act of consuming and

then investigates the many strands of metaphor from literary theory, poetics, and history that are woven into it. Its inquiry into the consumption of meaning generates a split into parallel sequences of poetic autobiography and cultural theory that are as unreconciled as their larger counterparts, poetry and criticism.

This explicit division between discursive scholarly writing and autobiographical and poetic writing is also questioned by the form of several other essays, which variously fold back on themselves so that the form questions the materials in play. This is not just an implicit claim that essays on radical poetry need themselves to be complicit with convention-breaking struggle, although I do believe that the ordinary expository essay has certain blind spots and cognitive limitations that we need to understand better if we are going to be able to sustain pertinent discussion of the more innovative recent poetries. Nor is it advocacy of autobiographical frameworks for critical writing. I hope rather that the form of the essays can be enjoyed as an integral accompaniment to the specific reasoning within the essays themselves.

The historical period under review here is largely the postwar era of American and British poetry, although the historical discussions go further back. The poems I discuss are almost all either American or British, although the arguments here could be extended to other poetic traditions. Even to bring these two sometimes divergent histories into dialogue is much less common that it should be, given the intricate patterns of influence and development that often tie them closely together in practice, and the lack of mutual knowledge of each other's traditions and achievements beyond the high-profile poetic immigrants to each country.

These essays had their beginnings in magazines and book-length collections that enabled me to work out the ideas in receptive contexts, where I benefited greatly from editorial advice, revision, and above all encouragement. I would like to thank in particular Charles Bernstein, Ivan Gaskell, the late Salim Kemal, David Kennedy, Roger Luckhurst, Anthony Mellors, Ty Miller, Peter Nicholls, Miriam Nichols, Bob Perelman, Keston Sutherland, and Keith Tuma. All the essays have been extensively revised for this collection. I have wanted to avoid homogenizing them too much in the spirit of hindsight, personal or historical, and so I have mostly not tried to update their relation to the latest scholarship, unless it seemed absolutely necessary. Many fine and interesting studies,

such as Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, or Brandon LaBelle and Christof Migone's *Writing Aloud*, are already taking these issues in new and sometimes unexpected directions. My hope is that this discussion of the many stages, oral and otherwise, through which poetry is realized will contribute to this growth of understanding of contemporary poetry and its ambitions, achieved and still embryonic, in an age where much poetry is often poorly understood and looks irrelevant alongside the issues of the time.

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
1. The Long Biography of the Poem: A Scene of Reading	1
2. Poetry's Oral Stage	25
3. A History of the Poetry Reading	61
4. Anonymous Poetry	104
5. The Line-Break in Everyday Life	124
6. The New Memoryism: Reading Poetry in the Nineties	137
7. Dirigibles	160
8. Eat Write	199
Notes	221
Works Cited	225
Index	239

Chapter 1

The Long Biography of the Poem

A scene of reading

Start with a scene of reading. Will it be office, library, classroom, or study armchair? A clear mind charged with rigor and wholly committed to the text? Or one drowsily switching between the page and my friend Tony, who looks odd in new reading glasses that trouble me because they remind me of advancing middle age, as he works his way through a pile of children's novels he is judging for the Smarties Prize. Our wicker chairs are some distance from the rented holiday house, under the shade of a large cedar, and we are enjoying the quiet time after breakfast while our four children sleep off their late night, and our partners go for a walk. Both of us are a little resentful, a little tense about working on holiday even for a couple of hours, and I am worrying about how to explain the idea of distant reading I want to summarize for this collection of essays on poetry performance, readership, and consumption. This chapter needs a couple of examples of modern lyric poetry, and the books by Allen Fisher, Susan Gevirtz, and Lissa Wolsak I have brought haven't yielded anything that would be familiar enough for readers to enable me to make general observations, so I am now leafing through an anthology I threw into my bag at the last moment, J. D. McClatchy's *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1990), looking for material. This "mainstream survey" that "draws on and addresses the MFA/Creative Writing program circuit for its contents and audience," in the words of Alan Golding (35), is the best I can do; there are no libraries or bookshops likely to supply modernist English language poetry within a hundred kilometers in this part of France. Eventually I decide on Frank O'Hara's poem "Ave Maria" and John Ashbery's "Syringa," and begin

scribbling in the margins of the soft paper, and then speaking to a dictaphone. My thoughts are a disjointed overlay of memories of other readings of the two poets; of friends' comments, articles, and student essays about them; images of Ashbery himself looking frail alongside Denise Levertov at a reading in Cambridge, and then looking distinguished on the platform at Senate House in London; a recollection of buying an intriguing yet baffling copy of *The Tennis Court Oath* in the early nineteen-seventies from Better Books in the Charing Cross Road; and the horror of a description of O'Hara's protracted deathbed scene, a memory now stuck to another of a friend reading aloud the lines, "And up the swollen sands/ Staggers the darkness fiend, with the storm fiend close behind him," in an attempt to introduce me to "The Skaters." A child interrupts these reveries to ask if we are going to the lake, and a clattering from the kitchen doorway reminds me that lunch has to be prepared. The scene ends. It is hard to imagine a more perfect location to read these poems (nor one as calculated to create stereotypes of the bourgeois holiday in the minds of my readers), yet it still falls short of a familiar ideal of what reading a poem ought to be like, the moment of complete cognitive and emotional transformation of self by the text.

Reading is always like this, embedded in an everyday world, one more usually of even greater distractions, of buses and taxis, computers and phones, deadlines, hunger and anxiety, always partial, tendentious, and tainted with both recollection and anticipation. If we think about this at all, we are likely to assume that ideally reading should not be like this, that it should be a moment of intense absorption excluding the contingencies of leisure, work, or supervening passions. Most attempts to represent interpretation of poems discursively as "readings" still elide the implications of the contingent history of actual sessions of reading in favor of a supposedly more comprehensive understanding that rises above the messiness and temporal incompleteness of individual run-ins with the text, on the premise that their singularity plays no part in the significant meanings generated by the poem. A "reading" resembles a composite image in which all the oddities of particular angles of vision have been rounded off, and the poem can be treated as a material object for which a complete description is at least potentially possible, even if what amounts to this totality may change as culture, knowledge, and ideologies alter.

These poems by Ashbery and O'Hara had traveled a long distance

from their composition and first publication to the house in France, a distance measured in space, time, and culture. Such distances, I shall argue, are not extrinsic to the meaning and significance of poems. The text is altered by the wear and tear, repairs and remodeling it undergoes as it is read over time by many different readers, and as Michael Palmer says, in some texts “the very fact of decay is what is generative of new meanings” (276). This history of responses, uses, memories, expectations, and other actions (much more heterogeneous than literary criticism usually acknowledges) constitutes the only unity the poem has. Since writing is a technology of varying degrees of success and failure for the management of spatial and temporal distances, and poetry an art that intensifies selected aspects of language and writing to create the patterns that generate meaning, distance is a potential poetic material as much as rhythm is for a metrics. This distance is created by the scale of our culture, however, much more than by geographical measures. The diversity of venues for poetry has enormously increased along with the sheer numbers of readers, readings, publications, and critical responses, and the timescale for these responses has undergone that same acceleration that is widely reported in other areas of contemporary life, with the consequence that what used to be a period of time in which relatively little would happen to the poem is now a crowded and complex history, each new decade packing in more than the last. Distance as a density of reception is also produced by public culture, and within it by the institutions of education and the economies of cultural capital, by the legitimating institutions of knowledge such as institutional science, and the political maneuverings of public spheres and their counter-public spheres. The density of social spaces within a specific geography has also increased enormously, producing social distances that contemporary literary texts have to weather somehow, treating them either as local differences of climate against which the text must be proof, a background noise to be ignored, or a field of difference to be celebrated and incorporated into textual production. In these circumstances, features of the poetic condition that have always existed become suddenly much more salient than before, have much greater influence on the reception of poetry, and are, at least potentially, more visible to both writers and historians.

I shall call this condition “the long biography of the poem” following the introduction of the idea of a long biography of the commodity in