

The Day the Music Died Encouraging Prosodic and Emotional Analysis in the Oral Interpretation of Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines issues unique to the coaching and oral interpretation of poetry, focusing on the role of prosodic analysis in creating a meaningful interpretation. Contending that current forensic practice produces interpretations that do not value the uniqueness of poetry as a literary genre, this paper proposes a coaching method that encourages the student to examine both prosodic and emotional elements within the selection. A review of literature of oral interpretation textbooks from a variety of time periods is provided, examining the prominence placed on different styles of poetic analysis, and comparing these advocated techniques to current forensic practice. This paper argues that by approaching the performance of poetry in a manner fundamentally different from prose or drama, coaches and students will succeed in meeting a key goal of oral interpretation in forensics: the greater understanding of literature as an art form.

Introduction

Two years ago, the Sundance Channel, a cable channel devoted to the works of independent filmmakers, commissioned animators from around the country to create short films based on the poetry of Billy Collins. Each animator was to take one Collins poem and use a recording of Collins's reading of the poem as the audio track for a short film. The goal of the animators was to bring the images of the poem to life, their visual creativity accompanying Collins's interpretation of his own verses. The resulting shorts were eventually posted to their own website – bcactionpoet.org – and to the popular video upload site YouTube. The short videos proved very popular, garnering many comments. While most praised the hard work of the animators and their visual innovations, many comments were critical of Collins's skills as an interpreter of his own poetry. One user praised the animators, but advised the poet “dont read you poetry on a monoton voice because then it really messes up the meaning of the poem [sic].” Others commented on what they perceived to be Collins's flat delivery: “oh goodness! the voice! can you be more make-me-wanna-sleep-ish! goodness!” and “why does he have to talk like hes about to die.”

Though many might point out the silliness of critiquing a former poet laureate's performance of his own work, the comments of these users touch on a

major issue of poetry performance. It is doubtful that anyone would describe a national final round of poetry in forensic competition as “make-me-wanna-sleep-ish.” The kinds of poetry performance that receive high ranks in forensic competition usually have vibrant, dynamic narrators whose emotions run as wide a gamut as possible. In the final round of Poetry Interpretation at the 2007 NFA National Tournament, competitors smacked the ground with their hands, spoke barely above a whisper, screamed obscenities at the top of their lungs, and several wept when they finished their performance. The air in the room was electric, and I heard several people remark as they were leaving that it was the best round of oral interpretation in any category they had ever seen. Expansive gestures, highly variegated emotional levels, and a sense of dramatic build that includes rising action and a climax all make for an engaging performance that, in general, does well in competition.

Contrast this with an average poetry reading sponsored by a university English department. A published poet is invited to read from their own collection of works, often accompanied by a talk on their craft, meant to aid students of creative writing in their own pursuits. The poet's reading of their work (excepting slam poets) is most often muted and understated. No characterization, no dramatically constructed narrators, no gestures, and quite little vocal variety. In a round of forensic competition, some of the most lauded poets currently writing would almost certainly receive a 5. Reason for decision: not enough expression, did not engage audience.

So, what criteria are we in the forensics community using to evaluate poetry if poets' own interpretations of their poems would fail in competition? Judges often approach poetry performance looking for the same kinds of things one would expect from a round of prose or drama: clearly defined and well-characterized narrators, and a sense of dramatic progression. However, in using non-poetic criteria to evaluate performances of poetry, judges force students to approach poetry as something that it is not.

Geisler (1985) noted this same tendency in the forensic approach to poetry. She observed in “non-competitive settings, special pains are taken to protect the character of the poetic genre: the understanding and evocation of cadence, rhythm, linguistic complexity and device” (p. 76). She went on to

note that all of these aspects of poetry are categorically ignored in favor of a more prose-like interpretation. By letting the literary aspects that make poetry what it is fall by the wayside, we are doing a disservice to our students if the goal of oral interpretation is the deeper understanding of literature. Geisler continued that Ricoeur would call an interpretation that ignores these concepts “less valid.”

Consequently, we are working in direct contradiction of what some authors view as the goal of poetry interpretation. A review of oral interpretation textbooks reveals a host of coaching techniques that concentrate on more “literary” aspects of oral interpretation. For example, Lewis (2001) advocated using what many would consider a very traditional literary approach to performing poetry. Delving into such terms as anapest, dactyl, and caesura, he advised poetry interpreters to examine closely the musical side of language. He mirrors Geisler’s (1985) caution that a poem like Poe’s “The Bells” with its overt, sing-songy rhythm would lull the audience into a torpor. However, he gives the role of meter and rhythm such high importance that he advises interpreters to mark which syllables should be properly accented in a poetry selection. Such minute attention to the rhythm of poetic language would most likely seem a silly, time-consuming, and ultimately pointless task to many competitors in poetry. Lee and Gura (2001) encouraged a similarly literary approach to performing poetry, and addressed students who balk at such close analysis of poetry: “In order to share the poem, you first must ‘own’ it—that is, you must understand the words and respond to the poem’s rhythm and sound...how they cast their spell over us and achieve their extraordinary power and beauty” (p. 375). They went on to discuss many of the other literary components that Geisler mentioned are ignored in forensic competition: cadence, rhythm, and other devices used to construct images in poetry. They argued that both knowledge and execution of these aspects are absolutely essential in creating a valid oral interpretation.

I am not advocating that competitors start competing in exclusively classical literature, trotting out iambic pentameters at every tournament. Nor am I contending that the literary value of poetry is only found in its prosody or musical features. Certainly the image-laden nature of modern prose poetry has tremendous literary value, and makes fine material for oral interpretation. However, I am often reminded of an experience I had during my competitive career. A teammate and I entered into an experimental event called Extemporaneous Interpretation. In the second round of competition, each competitor was given a series of poems that had to be cut and programmed in half an hour. Half of the poems had a marked rhythmic bent or a very evident rhyme scheme; the poems were clearly written with attention to prosody. During our prep time for the event,

my teammate systematically cut out every rhyme, every pair of accented syllables that could have contributed to a musical rhythm. When I asked what she was doing, she responded, “I’m making it more like a prose...I’m making it better. This way, the judges will like it.” When poetry performance is praised for ignoring the very aspects that make it poetry, something must be changed. As forensic educators, we are clearly not doing enough to ensure that our students understand the unique literary structure of poetry. I propose a method of coaching poetry interpretation for forensic performance that respects the structural elements of poetry and maximizes student learning about the literary elements of poetry as a genre.

Review of Literature

A review of relevant literature illuminates several issues concerning the oral interpretation of poetry, and the role of literary analysis therein. Gernant (1991) claimed that the pedagogical value of oral interpretation is the growth of the student’s understanding of literature as an art form. Such an understanding comes through “literary analysis” of the selection, but what does this term mean exactly? I examine literature that focuses on two kinds of analysis, prosodic and emotional, as well as forensic research that shows how, and to what extent, forensic competitors perform these sorts of analysis.

Prosodic Analysis

A review of oral interpretation textbooks reveals a variety of different approaches to the interpretation of poetry. As mentioned above, Lewis (2001) put forward a technique familiar to many English teachers. Through careful study of the “architecture” of the poem, a valid interpretation can be found. Lewis proposed that students must have under their belts a basic understanding of the structural elements of poetry in order to perform it. An effective interpreter of poetry should be able to scan a selection for accent and meter, and show evidence of such analysis in their interpretation. Through careful analysis of the linguistic elements of the piece, a true and valid interpretation is found.

Certainly this emphasis on the prosodic elements of poetry is mirrored in several other guides to oral interpretation of poetry. Texts from the ‘60s and ‘70s encourage a more structure-oriented approach to poetry. Mouat (1962) noted that studying the rhythmic elements of a poem is vital to a valid interpretation: “Probably the main reason poetry is often read so poorly is that the reader does not recognize the rhythmic movement” (p. 118). Like Lewis, Mouat recommended marking a poem for accented syllables and stress to better understand the “rhythmic movement of the piece.” Bacon (1966) also devoted a great deal of his discussion of poetic interpretation to the dissection of rhyme and structure, and how these elements bring out the inherent mu-

sic within a poem. He notes that all literature is likely to have its own sense of melody. Any carefully written piece of literature has a “tune” inside of it, and this music is even more explicitly poured into a work of poetry. Any valid interpretation of a poem, then, must examine the musical aspect of the work to bring out what the author originally intended. Similar to Mouat’s approach, Bacon put the musical elements of poetry on center stage.

This attitude towards poetry is anything but antiquated. Modern oral interpretation texts also emphasize a strong knowledge of structural elements in poetry and its key role in creating an effective oral performance. Lee and Gura (2001) devoted time to minute, prosodic analysis of poetry, but also emphasized more broad structural concepts such as pattern and repetition, arguing “the total impact of the poem is achieved only when content and structure are perfectly coordinated” (p. 336). This sentiment does not differ in the least from the core arguments found in the oral interpretation textbooks that are currently decades old. O’Connor (2004) offered a perspective more grounded in the English tradition when discussing the role of poetry performance in a classroom. He echoes Adams’s (1956) assertion that the oral interpretation of poetry is a crucial component of any poetry unit for an English classroom. He offers suggestions to English teachers of poetry for “punching” and “painting” lines of poetry, and all of these suggestions revolve around analyzing a poem for structural elements and figuring out which segments of verses deserve to be emphasized.

A fastidious, metrical scanning of poetic verse seems like a relevant exercise when dealing with older poetry that has a much heavier bent towards a formulaic meter. The poetry of Donne and Shakespeare comes to mind, complete with iambic pentameter and slant rhymes. However, is such close structural analysis of poetry a relevant exercise for modern free verse poetry? Slam poetry? Certainly, not all English scholars agree that close, structural scanning of a poem is beneficial to a student’s understanding of a poem. Burk (1992) cautioned that one of the most dangerous things a coach or teacher of poetry can do is inundate a student with lists of technical terms that ultimately bear little significance in the overall understanding of the poem. However, Mouat (1962) and Bacon (1966) both emphasized that even within the looser framework of modern free verse poetry, attention to structure and musical aspects of poetry must be paid. Armstrong and Brandes (1963), in particular, note that even with a concept like “prose poetry,” the performance of such a text must still sound fundamentally different from the performance of prose.

Emotional Analysis

Not all oral interpretation texts focus so primarily on the prosodic or musical elements of poetry,

however. The bulk of Mattingly and Grimes’s (1970) work on oral interpretation of poetry is devoted to issues of situation and message, concepts much more familiar to the modern forensic coaching of poetry. Though some mention is made of the role of phonetics in creating an image, Mattingly and Grimes were primarily concerned with the following questions, which they claim every effective interpreter of poetry must answer:

1. What is the essence of the poetic experience with which we are here concerned?
2. What situational aspects affect the attitude of the interpreter?
3. What physical responses does the poem require?
4. What vocal responses does the poem require? (p. 192)

Attention must be given to music and structure, but paramount in this approach is the more nebulous “poetic experience” that the interpreter communicates. This holistic approach to poetry is mirrored in Armstrong and Brandes (1963), who put forward that “...it is not easy to distinguish between [prose and poetry]. The difference is only one of degree. In the broader sense, poetry makes its appeal to emotion and thus to the imagination. Prose has an emotional element, but such an element is often subordinate to reason” (p. 251). Though they contend the line between prose and poetry is blurry, these scholars outline an approach to oral interpretation of poetry that ensures that the performance stays distinctly poetic. Instead of relying on such traditional tools as scansion and metrical analysis (though these attacks are given a fair amount of weight), they focus on musical aspects such as tone, sound, and onomatopoeia, and how these structural elements relate to the emotions the poet is trying to create through their writing. They argue that cognizance of these elements is the key to crafting the performance that communicate Mattingly and Grimes’s idea of “poetic essence”: “We may enjoy musical sound in poetry for its own sake, but we must remember that our enjoyment will be intensified if we enjoy the rhythm as it supports the emotionalized idea” (p. 264). It is this emphasis on the “emotionalized idea” that separates prosodic analysis from this broader form of what I term “emotional” analysis. This form of analysis ferrets out the emotional content of the poem, and then examines how textual elements serve to communicate that emotion. Prosodic analysis analyzes the text itself; emotional analysis looks at the emotions behind the words. However, either kind of analysis still uses textual elements to reinforce the communication of the poetic message. Both approaches argue that knowledge of poetry’s unique structure is vital to creating a valid and true oral interpretation.

Literary Analysis in Current Forensic Practice

The question of what kind of analysis must be performed on an oral interpretation selection is an issue that appears in several places in the forensic literature on oral interpretation. Gernant (1991) furthered the notion that the role of oral interpretation is to increase a student's understanding of literature as a whole. As such, a successful oral interpretation performance should showcase the student's analysis of the script and demonstrate evidence that the student has "done their homework" and analyzed the script outside of rehearsal. To test this, she surveyed a number of oral interpretation competitors at a forensics tournament, asking them questions about the kind of literary analysis they perform outside of a coaching appointment to become more familiar with the literary aspects of the selection. Her results were disheartening: many of her responses included phrases that interpreters either had no idea how to do literary analysis, or that close scrutiny of the text was not necessary to a quality interpretation. Responses like "My coach did all the analytical stuff and marked my script up for me" and "I really have no idea what to do" led Gernant to conclude that literary analysis is currently being cast along the side of the road: "While a student may validly argue that their text can stand alone, responses indicated an ignorance and a misunderstanding of the goal and justification for interpretation in forensics" (p. 46).

Keefe (1986) tape recorded a number of coaching sessions at schools that regularly placed in team sweepstakes at national tournaments. She transcribed the conversations and analyzed the interaction that occurred in the coaching session. She divided the interactions between the coach and the students into categories such as "agreement," "questioning," and "demonstrating." In her analysis, she also examined how much time was devoted to exploration of the script. She found that the bulk of the coaching time in the sessions was devoted to exploration of the script and to literary analysis, which directly rebuffs Gernant's claim that literary analysis is not a priority when preparing an oral interpretation performance.

While Keefe's (1986) claim that literary analysis still forms the crux of poetry coaching sessions is certainly encouraging, she doesn't elucidate what kind of analysis is going on in these sessions. Certainly the same techniques that interpreters of prose and drama use to generate character and find meaning within a text are certainly valid in analyzing a selection of poetry. However, are coaches helping students strive to understand what makes poetry a unique literary genre, and not just another first person monologue? The prosodic analysis that Mouat, Bacon, and Lewis all championed is certainly one method students can use to approach poetry differently than prose or drama, but such techniques

seem ill-advised for the kind of spoken word poetry that is prevalent on today's circuit. It is true that slam poetry is not only easier to approach from an oral perspective than highly structured verse, but it also contains the social relevance that is highly valued on the circuit (Bruce & Davis, 2000). However, the sort of structural analysis that many scholars trumpet as necessary to a justified oral performance of poetry is still possible with modern spoken word verse. O'Connor (2004) demonstrated how his strategy of punching and painting words can be done with any free-verse poem through the conscious selection of which words to emphasize sharply, and which words to smooth over. It is this kind of structural analysis that I contend is starkly absent from many poetry performances on the forensic circuit. Surely Gernant's assertion that the goal of oral interpretation is to familiarize students with the ins and outs of literary analysis is one that few would disagree with. Keefe's findings that literary analysis is regularly occurring in poetry coaching are also encouraging. I maintain, however, that we must find a method for analyzing poetry and creating poetry performances that is amenable to all kinds of poetic literature, and that creates performances that respect the uniqueness of poetry as a literary genre.

Discussion

I admit my own views on poetry interpretation spring from my previous experience as both a student of linguistics and teacher of English. I don't see these previous experiences as biases, per se; rather, they afford me a unique perspective on the coaching of poetry performance, having previously taught the subject in a classroom. The forensic tournament as laboratory for the communication classroom is an often repeated metaphor in the literature of forensic research (Aden, 1991; Harris, Kropp, & Rosenthal, 1986; Swanson, 1992). For me personally, given my experience as an English instructor, the competitive round of poetry interpretation becomes an extension of the English classroom. A sound coaching method should satisfy Gernant's (1991) claim that the pedagogical value of performing poetry is to increase the student's understanding of poetry as a literary genre. Poetry, more than any other interpretive event, offers the opportunity for the kind of literary understanding that Gernant is calling for. By casting proses and DIs as first-person monologues, coaches encourage interpretations of this kind of literature to become more "performance" based experiences. This leads the coach to ask questions about the character being portrayed ("what is the character thinking here? Why are they reacting this way? How can you best portray this?, etc.) and not necessarily about the text. Poetry on the other hand, comes with its own sets of interpretation issues that are more grounded in "literature" in a sense more familiar to English teachers. Yes, students must dig to find and identify

a narrator that they will later internalize, but along the way they encounter a host of non-intuitive word choices and linguistic structures unique to poetry. With a few exceptions, the point of poetry is that no one actually talks like how a poem sounds. The level of imagery and tone of the language elevate it away from every-day common speech. Therefore, a solid interpretive performance must first look at the language on the page to find a true interpretation. Of course, interpreters of prose and DI must also look at the words on the page, but poetry is words that are expressly meant to be musical to a degree that prose and drama simply are not. This musicality is a feature of poetry performance that must be maintained, and this is where prosodic analysis must come into play.

Of course, it is possible to be too over-the-top with musical language. Hitting each “s” sharply in alliteration is certainly a distraction, but this is something that an effective coach of poetic interpretation must work with the student on to find a balance. As mentioned above, this sort of prosodic concentration on the musical facets of poetry is equally valid, I feel, in older texts as well as newer ones. Whether metered verse, modern free verse, or contemporary slam poetry, the text must be looked at for musical traits that must come out. This is the value of prosodic analysis of the text. It gets poetry performance to stop sounding like prose and more like a form of literature that is meant to have musical qualities to it.

Emotional analysis of the piece, however, is equally valid. A surgical scansion of the piece is still necessary, I maintain, to bring certain musical qualities to life, but a student must understand the complex interplay between these musical qualities and the emotional content of the piece. This is where emotional analysis comes in. Mattingly and Grimes (1970) put forth a series of questions that is still valid today. In addition to analyzing the music of a poetic selection, students must examine the connotations of the words within the piece to tease out the emotional message behind the words.

I do not sense a sore lack in this area of forensic competition. We have trained our interpreters to become powerful communicators of emotion, and performances that end up in national out-rounds (and these are the performances we must examine the closest, since this is what judges are rewarding and what future competitors will emulate) certainly display clear narrators that emote very believably. However, while vivid imagery certainly appears in high quality literature for poetry interpretation, I still find myself thinking, even while this image-laden text is performed, “It all still sounds like a prose monologue.”

Students must see how form and content interrelate; focusing too much on one at the expense of the other is not pedagogically sound coaching.

Coaching towards internalization in poetry is clearly a worthy goal, and it leads to the kind of vibrant performances that made the final round of poetry at NFA such an electric experience. However, too much concentration on the emotional content of the piece makes a poetic performance indistinguishable on a literary level from a performance of prose or DI. A musical performance of poetry combined with emotional content is truly what the forensics world should encourage, if oral interpretation is to remain an activity that encourages a profound understanding of literature as an art form.

Coaching Method

I propose a method for coaching poetry interpretation that combines the benefits of both prosodic and emotional analysis. This method will hopefully generate a performance that Geisler (1985) would call the “creation and re-creation of an art form” (p. 77). A performance born out of this coaching method would ideally communicate the musical and poetic elements of the poetry while also creating a performance that is, in and of itself, a work of art.

As with any performance, we must first start with the text. On the first coaching session of any poetry piece, I would not see the piece on its feet. Rather, I would talk with the student on why they are drawn to this particular poem or group of poems (assuming, of course, they found the poems on their own). If the student first encountered the poem through a coach or teammate, I would discuss why they wish to perform these selections. Very simply, why do they like it? Once a personal stake with the piece is established, I would encourage a more minute analysis of the text by asking “What makes this piece poetic to you?” Discussion would be encouraged on the nature of poetry (Does it have to rhyme to be poetry? Does it have to be “pretty”? If it’s written by someone who is a famous poet, what makes this person a different writer than, say, a prose writer?), and why this selection is poetic. Before the next coaching session, I would assign the student to look up in the dictionary any words that they do not know the definition of. Beyond this, though, the student should double-check the definition of any other unfamiliar words in the piece in either a dictionary or a thesaurus. The word may have some connotation that the student is unaware of that may change or enhance the meaning of a given verse.

In the next coaching session, I would have the student run through the piece all the way through for the first time. I here heed Burk’s (1992) advice that jumping immediately into high-flown poetic terms of prosody can kill off a student’s interest in poetry immediately. I would instead start with a more emotional analysis of the piece. When the student was done performing, I would ask them to name which points in the piece were the emotional high points of

intensity. These can be either moments of quiet power, or loud, bombastic energy. We would then go back to the text and identify which words and verses most served to bring out this intensity. Once these words were identified, we would examine what exactly to do with those words. Should “stab” be said surprisingly loud to jolt the audience? I would turn the discussion here to what the audience will be feeling at this point – the “poetic experience” that Mattingly and Grimes concern themselves with – and how the delivery style of certain lines and phrases would enhance that experience. This session would again come with homework: the student must identify the three most “challenging” sections in the selection from a linguistic point of view. These are the selections that would most easily prompt a reader or listener to say “I’m not quite sure what the poet is saying here.” The student must then re-write the poem or selection in their own words, free of any poetic language or device. This way, the student understands not only the subtext of the pieces, but how the poet dressed up an idea in poetic language. I would work together with the student on “de-coding” part of the first selection before sending them off to do it on their own before the next session.

In the next coaching session, we would talk about the student’s homework assignment. Was the student able to glean the core message from the poetic devices on the surface? Whether or not the student encountered troubles, we would talk about what the student discovered. If the student encountered difficulty, I would work together with them on this coaching session to complete the assignment, even if it meant not seeing the piece standing up that day. If the student did complete the assignment, I would discuss the student’s findings.

Now, a shift of gears would take place. Since we’ve done primarily emotional analysis up to this point, I would encourage more prosodic analysis. I would have the student perform, but before beginning the interpretation, I would encourage the student to be listening to themselves speak, and notice if there are any instances of “musical” elements of the language that come out. Does one letter appear more often in one part of the selection? Are words repeated at all? Do you find yourself slipping into a rhythm at all? If so, this rhythm should be encouraged! I would talk with the student after the performance to see if they noted any musical elements of the language. If not, we would sit with the text and look for instances of prosody as they appear on the page. Discussion would be stemmed towards what exactly this musical language accomplishes. As a final homework assignment, I would ask the student to simply examine the text for any instances of alliteration, assonance, or anything else that the student notes as “musical.” We would look to bring these out in future coaching sessions.

I realize this is an ambitious approach, and it must be tailored based on each individual student. Some will have more of a “musical” ear and will pick out the more prosodic elements of the selection easier, others will have a harder time. As with any coaching technique, the coach must work with the student to develop attainable goals based on each student’s individual strengths and weaknesses, keeping education as the primary goal.

Conclusion

The goals of a poetry reading and a forensic poetry performance are undeniably different. A creative reading of poetry serves to highlight only the words of the poetry itself, whereas a forensic poetry performance is an art form unto itself. Its twin goals are to showcase the poetic value of the selection, just as a poetry reading does, but also to display the dynamic performance ability of the interpreter. Unfortunately, much of forensic poetry performance values this second criterion at the expense of the first. By incorporating sound prosodic analysis into the coaching of the oral interpretation of poetry, we increase not only the legitimacy of the performance, but student understanding of poetry as a whole. I propose a coaching method that respects both the musicality and the emotional impact of the poetic genre of literature. In addition to incorporating elements of the above coaching method into their own pedagogy, coaches can also work together with their English departments and creative writing faculty members to help students craft sound performances. Such inter-departmental cooperation would not only be a performance benefit to the students, but it would increase awareness of the forensic program on campus. Any chance a coach or DOF has to generate good will on campus should be taken advantage of, and this would be one way to get the name of the forensic program out on campus. Students should also be encouraged to draw off what they learn in their literature classes and apply it to forensic performance. In this way, forensics remains a truly co-curricular activity and not just one that exists in its own vacuum in the competitive world.

Oral interpretation of poetry presents unique challenges to both the forensic interpreter and the forensic coach. When these challenges are met, however, poetry has the potential to be the most powerful of linguistic performances, distilled language that communicates the most profound emotions with the greatest economy of words. It is this linguistic harmony that we must encourage our students to seek out, cultivate, and perform.

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