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## **The Poetry Reading**

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## Abstract

*What is a poetry reading, how does the performed poem differ from the poem published on the page, and first and foremost: how do we read it? This article understands the poetry reading as an independent form of expression, which neither ranks above nor below the written poem, but can be placed alongside it. Contrary to the printed poem, the audience often only has access to the performed poem once – while it is being performed – and is subsequently forced to rely on the memory of the specific reading and situation. Similarly, the body, the voice, the place, the time – and, in the case of recorded readings, also the remediation – are vital to how the poetry reading creates meaning. The article methodologically investigates: How do we approach the poetry reading from an analytical and a theoretical perspective, and includes readings of three poetry readings by Vanessa Place, Pia Juul and Jacques Roubaud.*

I wrote and published my first book [Når der går hul på en engel (When an Angel Breaks), 1981] without ever reading any of the poems aloud. It came as a great surprise to me, when I learned that I had to read them aloud. It seems completely incomprehensible to me now, that I was able to write a poem without being conscious of its sound, and without reading it aloud while writing it, as a natural part of its composition.

– Pia Tafdrup<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Much recent literature dealing with the poetry reading suggests that it has gradually become the most common way of encountering poetry. In his thesis *Hur låter dikten* (What does the poem sound like), the Swedish poet and literary scholar Fredrik Nyberg focusses on recited poetry in Sweden, and attempts to outline its literary history (Nyberg, 2013). Nyberg mainly refers to American and Anglo-Saxon theory and literary history, especially the theorists Charles Bernstein, Lesley Wheeler and Peter Middleton, who have all made significant contributions to research on this topic. Like Nyberg, they all claim that the emergence, spread, significance and circulation of the poetry reading have changed markedly since, approximately, the 1950s, making poetry something that is, today, first and foremost experienced live (Bernstein, 1998, p. 5; Middleton, 2005b, p. 7; Wheeler, 2008, p. 129; Nyberg, 2013, p. 32; see also Middleton, 2005a). Even though the examples mentioned are from the US, Britain and Sweden, the same history, it seems, can be found in Denmark, which in the past 20 years or so has seen an explosion in the number of readings and events, poetry festivals, poetry reading sites etc.<sup>2,3</sup>

But how do we approach the poetry reading from an analytical and a theoretical perspective? What is a poetry reading, in fact? How does the performance and

reading of a poem relate to the poem on the printed page, and how can we analyse a poetry reading? Where do we begin? Which questions are relevant in this context, and how do we formulate them? The present article focusses on the poetry reading as an independent form of expression, where *performative* and *relational* aspects produce meaning in a different way than when the same poem is read silently from a book. *Body*, *place* and *voice* suddenly become important and play a role in the production of meaning.

The performative can be said to be about *how* the poem signifies on the stage, how it is given corporeality, and what the reader *does* to and with the text. The relational is concerned with human interactions and their social context, in other words, with what happens in the room in which the poetry reading takes place, between the people present, in the relationships and stories that may be represented there. As methodological points of orientation for anyone who wishes to analyse a poetry reading, I therefore suggest they consider the performative and the relational production of meaning – the intended as well as the unintended. The ways in which these meanings make themselves felt often have to do with: *the body* – the person reading's own body, how he or she uses it – as well as the audience's, together in the same room. *The place* – the physical place in which the reading takes place, how it in different ways may affect what happens there. The *voice* of the author is central to any poetry reading, both literally and figuratively. I will return to the notion of the literary voice below. I will also introduce the remediated reading – the poetry recording – versus the live reading that takes place here and now. In this process I will take a closer look at various forms of reading, by Danish writer Pia Juul, the American poet Vanessa Place, and French writer Jacques Roubaud.

It is important to bear in mind that many authors and texts deliberately work with the performative and relational aspects of the reading. When the listener suspects him- or herself of simply being inquisitive and biographical – I wonder if what is referred to in the poem really happened, I wonder if the poet is talking about his or her actual physical self when saying *I*, and so on – it may be an intended and valid literary effect. An effect that should be approached in the same way as, for example, figurative language and narrative voice, which is to say, it should be read. Part of what the Danish literary scholar Jon Helt Haarder has referred to as performative biographism draws a large part of its energy from this hesitation, this gap: 'Performative biographism is an attempt to interact discursively with reality and with the reader through use of a discourse which, traditionally, is empirically and directly rooted in it – in the biographic' (Haarder, 2014, p. 9).<sup>4</sup>

The concept of performativity is basically concerned with 'considering the *doings* rather than the being of the work', and this marks 'the analytical distinction between the work as an object and the work as an act' (Jalving, 2011, p. 14).<sup>5</sup> In an article on the status of performance in the writing of art history, the Ameri-

can art historian Amelia Jones writes: 'Due to its dependence on remains (documents, archives, memories), performance notoriously complicates the writing of histories, at the very least raising the questions of how the time-based, embodied work is *remembered*' (Jones in: Borggreen & Gade, 2013, p. 53; emphasis in original). In the same way as is done in for example theatre studies, musicology and art history, comparative literature must also develop ways of analysing fleeting objects of analysis such as performance and readings, as well as reflect on how readings are *remembered*. The actual analysis is often a form of post-rationalisation, an analysis of a memory of what the analyst believes happened. Perhaps the analyst should make a habit of noting what he or she has seen and heard at a poetry reading – and preferably as soon after the event as possible.

## What is a Voice?

The Danish author Niels Frank argues (Serup, 2011, p. 73n2) that the literary voice is simultaneously a combination of something far too obvious and trivial, and something far too mystifying, and the fact is that the answer to the question of what a voice is or can be, at first seems obvious. Further reflection on it – and the voice as a phenomenon and metaphor has indeed attracted an exceptional amount of interdisciplinary interest – makes things slightly more complex.<sup>6</sup> The American media historian John Durham Peters (2004) has constructed 'five main conceptions of the voice around which various academic fields of inquiry cluster': *The voice as a metaphor of power*: the voice of God, the voice of the People, giving certain groups voice, silencing others, being heard. *The voice as a medium of communication*: a bearer of special skills/signals. *The voice as a vehicle of art and aesthetic expression*: when information is disseminated through a voice which expresses personal style – for example in literature, art and vocal performance – 'one of the most universal pleasures for the human species is the sound of a voice'. *The voice as a physical or physiological organ*: this interest is non-metaphorical, it focusses on lungs, throat, adenoids, acoustics, anatomy, physiology and so on. *The voice as Eros*: few things are as erotic as the sound of a voice – 'The voice can get under the skin in a way impossible for any other kind of touch'. Peters himself considers whether there are in fact only three main categories, as *Eros* is a form of *Power*, and the organic qualities of the voice also represent a medium for its capacity to communicate.

In a literary text the voice, figuratively speaking, has many pseudonyms, including tone, style or personality. Reviews and literary critique, among others, often refer to voice, arguing for example that the author has finally *found his voice*. But what it is that the author has found, what constitutes this metaphoric voice, is less clear. The Swedish literary scholar Horace Engdahl claims that what an author really imparts to the world and literary history is a particular tone, a voice, a nuance that

didn't exist before. A temperament perhaps. Our understanding of the tone of the text affects how and what we read, and how we seem to understand the text (Engdahl, 2004). This is also the case in the context of the reading – we understand the same words differently according to whether they are, for example, shouted, whispered or spoken. The voice which reads is simultaneously part of a specific bodily system and of a system of signs; it is both what it says and the way it says it, as well as who says it (the indexicality of the voice). The phonetic and semantic qualities are at the same time combined and separated by the voice itself (Kolesch & Krämer, 2006, p. 12; Neumark, Gibson & Van Leeuwen, 2010, p. xx). The author's – I was about to say: soulless voice, as it makes itself known in sound recordings and in texts, is simultaneously present and absent; it is absent-present, almost ghostly.

## What is a Poetry Reading?

According to the American poet and literary scholar Charles Bernstein, there are two fundamental ways of approaching the poetry reading: either as a continuation of the written text, and thus as something secondary to it, or as a valid work in its own right, which is not as such subject to its source or 'the original'. The reading of the reading entirely depends on which of the two approaches the reader subscribes to. While the reading understood as a continuation of the text can be seen as a variation of the original text, the reading understood as an independent work constitutes a discrepant or variant version of the same text (Bernstein, 2011, p. 123). There is a difference between a body and a book, and a read poem may even contradict the printed original. In such cases it may make little sense to challenge one version by pointing out that the other is 'the actual poem', the true poem. Instead, Bernstein argues, it is a question of acknowledging that a poem is not one, but many (2011, p. 128). This does not mean, however, that all readings of the poem are equally authoritative. For example, the poet's own reading of the poem holds greater authority than the performance by an actor of the same, Bernstein writes, just as the visual, graphic presentation of the poem in the first edition of the book enjoys greater authority than later editions of the poem, which may for example be typeset differently in anthologies, journals or similar.

The poet's own performance will, just like the first printed visualisation of the poem, mark the poem for ever, not just in its meaning, Bernstein argues, but in its very existence (1998, pp. 8-9). Once you have heard such distinctive readers as, for example, the Danish poets Peter Laugesen (driven, beat-like, rhythmical), Pia Juul (hesitant, self-correcting, dialectal), Lars Skinnebach (tonal, the voice like a saxophone, sudden jolts, sudden shifts) or Dan Turèll (insistent, focus on (rising) tempo, playing on alliterations) read their poems, their unique delivery, interpretation, and not least the imprint of their personal, physical voice will always affect subse-

quent readings of the texts. Silent readings will be coloured by the reading, and we read the poems of distinctive readers differently once we have witnessed the live performance. Jacques Roubaud's poem 'La Vie: Sonnet', which I will explore in more detail shortly, cannot be read independently of its phonetic aspect once you have heard the poet recite the poem. The poem and its meaning will always be affected by many things which are not solely tied to the semantics of the words, not least by how it sounds and how it looks.

The American artist and theorist Johanna Drucker has suggested that the various graphic codes of a text may function like a score of sorts, for the those who also want to hear the sound of the text – whether read aloud or silently in private. **Bold** or *italic* type, or different font sizes, are easy to translate into sound, often in the form of stress or changes in volume, even though the phonetic interpretation of the graphic signs always constitutes a personal interpretation (Drucker, 2009, p. 239). In modern poetry the use of line breaks has proved a highly useful tension, which plays on a particular phonetic/oral expectation, Drucker argues, and often, simply by viewing the page at a distance before reading the words, the reader gains an idea of the genre at hand. Left justified text and line breaks signal poetry (Drucker, 2009, pp. 237-238, 241).<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, it is possible that a person who has attended a couple of poetry readings, is able to recognise a poetry reading as a situation, when seeing it from a distance or entering a room in which it is being held, even before he or she is able to decode the words being read. The poetry reading is undoubtedly recognised as a social or relational situation. The typical Danish poetry reading, as it exists in the 2010s, follows a form in which one poet at a time (sitting or standing) reads his or her own poems from a text (paper, book, screen) on some form of stage (elevated or at the same level as the audience) to a silent, listening audience (sitting or standing), who have their eyes and attention directed at the poet.

The way in which something is read can itself change what is read into poetry – or at least signal that this is how it should be read. For example, Drucker draws attention to Bernstein's participation in American TV and radio commercials for *The Yellow Pages* in the late 1990s: '... *The Yellow Pages* is a striking demonstration of the way a mode of reading – itself materially encoded in terms of expressions, vocalization, timing, emphasis, and other inflections – can transform utilitarian language into poetic work' (Drucker, 2009, p. 243). Bernstein himself reminds us that 'poetry's all about accent while theory has a tendency to sound the impersonal' (Bernstein, 2011, p. 124).<sup>8</sup> But what could perhaps be called the accentuated performance of the text, is not the only thing which suggests that we are dealing with poetry, and thus makes us operationalise other ways of listening and reading than when flicking through *The Yellow Pages*, or reading communications with the tax authorities. The entire institutional framework which surrounds and constitutes the poetry read-

ing itself produces meaning and authority, and thus comprises one of the extra-textual aspects which are of importance in relation to the poetry reading, much as does the author's physical appearance. Think of the American author Kenneth Goldsmith's project 'Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Theory', in which Goldsmith, to background music, sings texts by Barthes, Freud, Adorno, Benjamin and others (excerpts from Harry Potter [sic!]) as an example of how the performance of a text completely changes it and forces us to read it differently.<sup>9</sup> In Denmark, Pablo Llambías did a similar project which lasted for several years, in which he, accompanied by musicians, sang various letters he had sent to more or less bureaucratic authorities.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary poetry readings, Lesley Wheeler writes, are first and foremost '... manifestations of authentic authorial presence, rather than [as] demonstrations of vocal skill...' (Wheeler, 2008, pp. 12-13 in: Nyberg, 2013, p. 35).

The reading is thus able to explore the boundaries between literature and non-literature through the way in which a text is read. According to Bernstein, the upper limit for what can be considered a poetry reading is music, realised in sound poetry, while the lower limit is silence, realised in visual poetry. 'Visual poetry gets us to look at works as well as read them, while sound poetry gets us to hear as well as listen' (Bernstein, 1998, pp. 11-12). Bernstein points out that the two boundaries may cross each other when the visual poem is performed as a sound poem, or when a sound poem is transcribed as a visual poem. If the outlined boundaries are overstepped, the implicit logic argues, we may still be dealing with performance, but not with literature.

## A Radically Poor Theatre

Regardless of whether the poetry reading is considered a continuation of the written text or a work in its own right, the reading in itself is always more than merely a piece of theatricized writing. The poetry reading can, according to Bernstein, be understood as a *radically poor theatre*. The typical poetry reading is not very spectacular; it involves few effects, little drama, limited dynamics – movements are not visually or spatially founded, rather rhetorical, auditory. Where the visual staging of traditional theatre entails a form of distance between the audience and the actor, the accentuation of the auditory generally has the opposite effect – it creates the illusion of a space, a physical connection between the audience and the speaker, and it is characterised by a different kind of intimacy than the one found in the theatre. What some find most problematic about the poetry reading, Bernstein writes, its anti-expressivity and relatively minimalist style (compared to, for example, typical plays or concerts), may prove to part of what characterises the poetry reading. Bernstein describes this minimal, rhetorical strategy of the poetry reading as *anti-performative* (Bernstein, 1998, p. 10).



Poetry readings are essentially collective events, where the text constitutes the simultaneous object of the majority of the participants' attention (Middleton, 2005a, p. 93), argues the English literary scholar Peter Middleton, who in his study of the poetry reading as a form of expression, especially the live public reading, highlights its relational qualities in particular. Of course, the 'text' should in this context not be understood as the written text, but as the poetic utterance as a whole. Any reading is also always a proposed reading, an interpretation of the poem through the use of pauses, stress, singing, enjambements etc., and through the use of rising intonation to mark as questions sentences, which in writing aren't necessarily questions. Ambiguities which may be undecidable in the text – lead/lead, sow/sow, wind/wind – are not so in the reading, where one is forced to make a choice when articulating them. For the body engaged in reading there are other limitations to the production of meaning – such as when the person is *forced* to pause for breath. Then there is all that which Bernstein calls 'non-verbal facial and bodily expressions or movements' (Bernstein, 1998, p. 14). The body has its own rhythms, its coughs and hiccoughs, its moans and ums and ahs, its repetitions and shifts in tonal strength, and 'incorrect' pronunciation. All of this can either be considered part of a semantics, or as irrelevant interruptions of the salient point: the reading of the poem. But again, what is the poem, where does it exist, if it exists at all?

In performative analysis, as in any other analysis, the analyst is forced to delimit the subject of the enquiry, while at the same time including and acknowledging in his or her reading many more elements which produce meaning, than those strictly internal to the text. A live reading also constitutes a whole or a type of macrostructure, in which the poet is able to escape the various specific logics and sequences of the individual written book. The poet sets the pace. In contrast to the silent reading, the reader is not able to flick through, reread, skip something or pause the reading. The poet can read from a range of contexts and thus create new ones – for example, at a more thematic level. As Peter Laugesen, who in his readings, with or without a band, often in effect creates a potpourri, a collage of various texts taken from various contexts, which merge in a sort of carpet of meaning, which says something other than the individual book does. It is this specific version of the text, which is read aloud at that specific place and time, and which is affected by and received in that specific atmosphere and situation, where the audience is also able to spontaneously react, laugh, clap, cheer and jeer, that constitutes Middleton's simultaneous object of the majority of the participants' attention. The individual reading always in itself constitutes a distinct aesthetic experience.

It is not just the performed poem that 'is many', as Bernstein says, which is to say, is many concurrent versions; it is also the poem you read on the page – as long as the reader and the act of reading and the world change and time passes. In addition, Middleton has argued that the poem in itself contains a temporal aspect. There is a



difference between reading a poem about computers and The Rolling Stones at the time of its publication in the 1970s, and then reading it 25 years later, just as it make a difference whether it is a young or an old poet who is reading a juvenile poem of their own. Middleton does a reading of the English poet Tom Raworth's reading of a poem written 25 years previously – the poet is a little chubbier, his hair a little whiter, and one can no longer assume that people know that the title of the poem, 'Ace', is a slang term meaning something like 'cool'. The effect of the re-read poem, Middleton writes, is almost nostalgic (2005b, p. 20). Time is thus also, in a broad sense, another of the extra-textual performative aspects that connotes during the reading. I will refer to others below, when reading the readings by Juul, Place and Roubaud.

I thus understand the poetry reading as a particular, independent form of expression, which I often only have access to through what I can remember of it. In my reading of it I focus on the performative (including performative biographism), the relational, the body, the voice, the place, the time and the remediation – though not in the same way, and to the same extent, in the various readings, where I focus on what seems most significant in each situation. In this way, my method can seem almost like a non-method, eclectic: I listen my way forward.

### **Pia Juul: *Min onkel Hector sagde* [My Uncle Hector Said]**

'If live performance of poetry can be, as [David] Antin once titled a talk, "a private occasion in a public space," then recorded poetry might be thought of as a public occasion in a private space' (Bernstein, 2011, p. 125). The read and recorded poem is listened to at home – or in the car or while cycling or on the treadmill – without the physical presence, body language, gestures and gesticulations of the poet to inform one's reading of or listening to the poem. Being present in the same room as the reader during the reading allows various other extra-textual markers to affect the understanding of the poem, including the poet's body, age, gender, way of moving, way of talking, way of dressing, and the entire impression they make and their attitude. It can be something as simple as a sweeping gesture with the hand, as in Pia Juul's (at least locally) well-known poem from *Sagde jeg, siger jeg* [I said, I'm saying] (1999) about Uncle Hector, who always did that. Like that. You can't see how Uncle Hector does it when reading the book, but when Juul herself reads the poem aloud, a sort of expectant tension always arises around this 'Like that'. I have both seen her show what Uncle Hector does with his hand, and I have seen her, almost demonstratively, refrain. This tension about the anticipated gesture, which will perhaps never occur, itself constitutes a performative element, which entails that the reading and the author's physical presence add *something* to the poem not found on the printed page; part of the text's intensity shifts from the printed page, from the text, out into

the room, where it creates a presence, a trembling, a *now*, a bodily rooted liveness, which also creates a connotative caesura in the poem.

The Danish literary scholar Elisabeth Friis spends several pages of her Pia Juul monograph discussing this 'Like that' and writes, among other things, that the effect of the suggested gesture, which on the printed page is invisible and inaccessible to the reader, is like saying: 'You cannot enter here. A text can fake confidentiality, but never establish it' (Friis, 2012, p. 71). Paradoxically, the gesture has the same effect in the read poem – we do not learn anything from (not) seeing Pia Juul's actual gesture. The entire poem works with a form of intimate, personal address, a familiar and anecdotal tone, where the reader, in Friis' words, 'becomes the lyrical I's conversational confidant' (Friis, 2012, p. 70), though this is still merely what it seems like, as we are still being seduced, or rather: we are reading a poem. We do not get *closer* to any truth or intimacy or reality; the poem is to a large extent the establishing of this trembling address, this intimate space, this confidentiality between you and me, and now I'm going to tell you (though I've probably told you before) what it looked like: 'Besides he always did / this with his hand / Like this' (Juul, 2012, p. 184). Seen from this perspective, the reading does not change the meaning of the written poem; it does not become radically different, but rather strengthened. Perhaps, even, the poem is intensified, and the pauses indicated by the line breaks are utilised skilfully by Juul to underline the poem's many qualities in terms of spoken language, ellipses and self-interruptions, not least, as well as the timbre of the voice, with warmth, complicity, you are being recognised, you are being addressed.

Reading a reading of a poem the way I do above is problematic, of course; I read from memory and even from how I remember Pia Juul's way of reading the Uncle Hector poem in general – that is, I am not thinking of one or more specific readings. There is a risk that what you think you remember or know, doesn't actually exist in reality, precisely because each individual reading is always a distinct event, unique in its being. Or in the words of John Durham Peters: 'Every performance is unique and unrepeatable in some ways, just as every signature is both unique and identical' (2004). My reading above is almost thematically structured. I say something about Juul's way of reading in general, her signature, but if you want to know more, you need to be more specific in your reading.

In the following I will take a closer look at two readings, which in different ways gain a large part of their meaning from the authors' performing bodies. The poetry readings are mediated differently: Vanessa Place's *On Pussy* (2009) is a video of a live reading, while Jacques Roubaud's *La Vie: Sonnet* (2009) is (primarily) a sound recording of a live reading. The years in parenthesis represent the year of the performance I am reading, and not the year the texts were written or printed.

## Vanessa Place: *On Pussy* (2009)

Vanessa Place's novel *La Medusa* (2008) is in many ways a more traditional (avant-garde) novel than her later, more ruthlessly produced conceptual work.<sup>11</sup> *La Medusa* includes, among other things, a long string of words, which consists exclusively of synonyms for the female genitals (Place, 2008, pp. 251-253). Place often performs the piece as an independent text with the title *On Pussy*. On YouTube there is a reading which lasts 4 minutes and 12 seconds, recorded in San Francisco in November 2009.<sup>12</sup> The text is post-productive in the sense that the textual material was found in a common cultural discourse, rather than written by the author herself – in order to explore what we actually say and, not least, which words we use to say it. Initially, Place's reading is funny – scattered laughter can be heard on the recording – but then becomes horribly dull – it seems to go on and on, even after the audience has got the point – eventually making the reading simply: horrible. Here the temporal plays an important role: it goes on and on, Place insists on continuing. Every single word is read aloud and in this way a presence in the room. Whereas when reading *La Medusa* you can skim text and thus *move on*, here the audience is hopelessly trapped for the just over four minutes the reading lasts. Four minutes that seem significantly longer. Apparently, there are just as many American English words for the female genitals, as there are said to be Greenlandic words for snow. I wonder how many there are in other languages? And for the male genitals? I wonder what this says, what it means, why or how or when do we need all these expressions? When would you use the word 'Pocahontas'? And in which social situation would you use one of the following: 'Pancake and Sugar Bowl, Cabbage Patch and Bacon Hole, Dripping Pan and Gashee, Gravy-Maker and Gumbo, Honey Altar, and Devil's Doughnut, Salt-Shaker, and MoneyMaker'? The words are organised according to sound and category, and constitute a sort of catalogue of what we, in American English, think – and can think – about the female genitals, what they phantasmagorically can be associated with in the collectively consciousness: there are many containers, many animals, a lot of food, many smells, many colours, many sticky semi-liquid things, many soft things meeting hard things ('Pincushion'), many hollows, gashes, caves, scratches, holes, tunnels. Specifically male attributes such as beards, semen and the male genitals are included in the metaphors ('Bearded Clam, Bearded Oyster', 'Cockpit', the ambiguous 'Manhole', because 'man' both can refer to 'human' and 'male'). In several places the imagery suggests that the female genitals are freely available service organs meant for servicing man ('Cock Inn, Cumbucket'). There are many money images, implying that this is the woman's 'MoneyMaker', her 'Cash & Carry' and 'Purse'. The massive alienation, the systematic reduction and dehumanisation and commodification of the woman and the female becomes scarily unpleasant reading here, not least, as mentioned, due to the fact that the string of words

aggressively goes on and on. What at the beginning of the text may be an expression that can stand alone as an insignificant example of vulgarity, in *On Pussy* becomes part of a horrible grinder, demonising, disgust-creating: 'Redeye, Pink, Undertaker, Stink, Lickity-Split, Bite a Bit, Fuzzsplit, Rosebud, and Mother Dear!' It is an example of a massive *pars pro toto* technique, but gradually anything but this *part* is erased; the part eradicates the whole and thus comes to take over and comprise it. The woman disappears in a kind of chanting curse which appears to simply go on and on, emphasised by the way in which Place has structured and reads the text – the perfect rhymes stand out and thus further contribute to making everything merge into an indistinguishable pell-mell.

The reading makes the text markedly different from when it is read in the novel *La Medusa*. The read text doesn't seem to be rooted in any narrative, psychological or fictional context, and the place of utterance is partly offset, making the words come not from the fictional character Dr Bowles, but from the very real and really present author Vanessa Place. The result of these displacements is that the text in terms of genre appears to change status, leaving the narrative and fictional logic of the novel and entering that of poetry. In the poetry reading itself, elements such as Place's clothes (black suit, lawyer-like one might say, with reference to the author's publicly known background as a lawyer), style of reading (quick, rhythmical, divided, it seems, into stanzas, but also in an attempt to vary the rhythm, very conscious of the sounds of the words, perfect and half rhymes are emphasised), gender and attitude (serious, concentrated, never laughing or smiling, not even once the reading is over, even though the audience laughs from time to time) affect the reading of the poem. It is this serious atmosphere, this persistence in Place's reading, which helps create the effect I described above as horrible. That the poem becomes horrible to listen to. That you are somehow taken hostage, forced to participate in it just going on and on, and where do you look? If we imagine an antithetical scenario, the effect would probably have been rather different if the same text had been performed by, for example, a young, male, casually dressed comedian, in an obscene, sniggering laddish style. These extra-textual connotations and additional layers of meaning, arises as an effect of, respectively, deliberate use of the performative qualities and opportunities of the reading, as described above, and of performative biographism (the author's appearance, possibly with deliberate and well-placed associations to the lawyer as a type). Paradoxically, the hand-held, shaky, zooming camera handling, which appears to attempt to dramatise the reading somewhat, in fact helps to de-dramatize it. It looks for visual distractions, so to speak, where neither the text nor the reading offer any redemptive except route. In the novel the long string of words is spoken by a Dr Bowles, who at a diner orders 'Pussy, please'. When the waitress fails to understand, he elaborates, minutely we might say. After the enumeration: 'The waitress steps back and it appears to Dr. Bowles that he has, if not actually bitten her, certainly tried'

(Place, 2008, p. 253). This is what it feels like, after having listened to *On Pussy*, as if you have been attacked. By the language. By the aggressive logic at work here.

The recorded version of the reading is less horrible or binding, I feel sure, than if you had been physically present at it. The effects of the reading's here-and-now and the author's presence have been annulled in the mediated version. Just as what could be called to social or relational situation has been invalidated – watching the reading alone on a screen, you are free to do other things at the same time, to fast forward and rewind, to pause, not having to pretend to be attentive, to listen, not having to be quiet, not interrupting. Neither does the listener have to pretend to be shocked by the shocking material, or show fitting respect for specific topics by being silent, by looking down, by looking serious, by paying extra attention etc., as you could imagine would be 'appropriate' when Place reads from, for example, her *Rape Jokes* ('If I wanted your opinion, I'd remove the duct tape'). Because at a poetry reading, which is also a social situation, it of course isn't only the poet who performs.

### Jacques Roubaud: *La Vie: Sonnet* [*Life: A Sonnet*] (2009)

Jacques Roubaud's reading of the poem *La Vie: Sonnet*, which is a sonnet which consists exclusively of 1s and 0s, is very illustrative of the fact that the way the poem is read aloud may also facilitate the reading of the poem in print and in general.<sup>13</sup> This could perhaps be said to be a poem which simultaneously is close to both the upper and the lower limit of what, according to Bernstein, constitutes a poetry performance. For the poem appears to be simultaneously both a visual poem and a sound poem, and also, as I will address more closely in the following, a more, should we say, conventional poem, in sonnet form no less. There is after all not a single sign or sound in the poem that does not refer directly to a semantic content. In the reading the figures become words – for which reason the French poem would sound very different in, for example, an English translation, even though the poems would, on paper, apart from the title, be visually identical. For example, the sound of the English *one* is homonymous with having *won*, whereas the French *une*, depending on the pronunciation, sound more like an expression of scepticism or surprise.<sup>14</sup>

There are marked shifts in temperament throughout the poem, which also appears to shift between monologue and dialogue and back again; the use of rising and falling intonation in the poem indicates that something is asked – and is answered. Listen, for example, to the third stanza, second verse (approx. 1.08): the question 'zero-une?' is clearly asked, and answered 'une-une' (as in 'nope'). In addition to the various intonations, the volume and pace at which the poem is read also become quite significant, including the use of pauses, both in between individual 'words', verses and stanzas. An obvious association here is binary code: the 0s and 1s; the position can be off or on. Similarly, 1 and being on usually connote, presum-

ably, something more positive than being a 0 and being off. Even in this careful feeling-our-way the signs gain value in a series of binary conceptual pairs, which by their nature are based on the notion that it is better to have something happen than not, that it is better and more fun when something is fast and loud, and that it is sadder when something is quiet, muted, and slow. I will argue that Roubaud's reading supports precisely such a reading.

Even the title of the poem, *La Vie*, points to a frame of interpretation: this is a poem about life (in the definite singular), which also to a large extent guides my reading in the following. The first and last stanzas mark relatively uneventful parts of life, the 00s, which begin and end with a long series of 0s, and the first and last verses are the only place in the poem where only a single 1 is to be found. In the second verse, first stanza, something begins to happen; 'une-une-une' could almost sound like a kind of pre-linguistic 'bla-bla-like' sounds. The first hesitant, tentative '000000 0000 01' are soon replaced by something else, something suppler, something testier, more fun. The reading gains in authority, becomes weightier, more self-confident, if that is what you can hear. Listen, for example, to the third stanza, first verse (approx. 00.53), which to me sounds almost didactic, supercilious, like someone's who has grown avuncular and has turned up to put the world to rights. In the fourth and last stanza, which undoubtedly is the stanza with the fewest 1s (eight) and the most 0s (30), Roubaud makes particular use of the pace of reading and of volume. He reads the 0s very slowly, almost mumbling the words, stumbling, lethargic, indifferent, time passes, uneventfully. At the end of the second verse there is a slight upturn (approx. 1.41), a '101', read plaintively, the sound of the last 'une' is allowed to die out, it is heart-rending. Apparently it makes such a final impression on the audience – the reading I refer to here was given at the international poetry festival in Rotterdam and is thus not a studio recording, but was recorded live in front of an audience – that some begin to applaud too early in the course of the second verse of the fourth stanza, because they hear an ending. This is probably caused by the pace and volume, slow, quiet, and when Roubaud briefly increases both the pace, the volume and the intonation to emphasise the verse's only 1, it sounds like a form of ending – but this poem about life is not over, but almost: the entire verse, the last of the poem, looks as follows (approx. 1.43): '0 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0'.

On YouTube there is a different recording of the same reading made from a different spot in the room with a camera and with a different microphone.<sup>15</sup> Try comparing it to the festival's own recording and notice how the position of the microphone changes what you seem to hear, what kind of poem it is, just as adding the sense of sight also plays a role. In this recording the physical presence of the audience, their bodies and their sounds, are a larger presence than in the festival's recording, which among other things contributes to making the room seem completely different. In the YouTube recording (approx. 1.09) it sounds as though several members



of the audience begin to applaud too early, for example, as though there was a more general consensus, as if more people thought the poem had ended, whereas the festival's own recording rather gives the impression that only a single, perhaps too eager, person applauded. The recorded reading is also always a remediated reading.<sup>16</sup>

## LA VIE: SONNET

000000 0000 01  
 011010 111 001  
 101011 101 001  
 110011 0011 01

000101 0001 01  
 010101 011 001  
 010111 001 001  
 010101 0001 01

01 01 01 0010 11  
 01 01 01 01 01 11  
 001 001 010 101

000 1 0 1 001 00 0  
 0 0 0 0 0 110 0 0 0  
 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0

## LIFE: SONNET

000000 0000 01  
 011010 111 001  
 101011 101 001  
 110011 0011 01

000101 0001 01  
 010101 011 001  
 010111 001 001  
 010101 0001 01

01 01 01 0010 11  
 01 01 01 01 01 11  
 001 001 010 101

000 1 0 1 001 00 0  
 0 0 0 0 0 110 0 0 0 101  
 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0

© Jacques Roubaud

<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/16498/auto/0/LIFE-SONNET>



Overall, one could say that the remediation creates a certain kind of reality effect, while at the same time and to a large extent creating an awareness of mediality, of the types of media used, both the original and the new ones. When dealing with remediation, it is necessary to consider what information is lost and what is added in each case, for each text. The remediation automatically entails a shift in perspective, so that we see something else, which was already there. Therefore, when reading a mediated reading, one should always consider how the medium which gives us access to the reading functions – what it *does* – like the camera handling in the recording of Vanessa Place, or the position of the microphone in the recordings of Jacques Roubaud. For this will also become an ever more frequent aspect of the way in which poetry is disseminated and creates meaning.

The reading and the sound of the poem are natural parts of the poem's composition for an experienced poet like the Danish Pia Tafdrup. In the same way, it should also be a natural, connotative element for the reader of the poem – and not least for someone reading a poetry reading. The poetry reading is an independent form of expression, which neither ranks above or below the written poem, but can be placed alongside it. Contrary to the printed poem, the audience often only has access to the performed poem once – while it is being performed – and is subsequently forced to rely on the memory of the specific reading and situation. The live poetry reading takes place in a particular place for a restricted period of time. This makes the poetry reading a fleeting object of analysis, but also a poetic form of appearance, where performative and relational elements create meaning in a different way than when the same poem is read silently from the page. Similarly, the body, the voice, the place, the time – and, in the case of recorded readings, also the remediation – are vital to how the poetry reading creates meaning. And just as when you read a poem in a book, not all the above elements prove equally important at all times; the reader must be open to what is in front of him or her, precisely in order to learn what it is he or she is dealing with. The reader must watch and sense and listen to the poetry reading him- or herself. The above remarks are thought as methodological orientation points, which the reader may initially take into consideration.

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## Notes

- 1 Personal conversation on 20 January 2016.
- 2 See e.g. Lyrikporten (<http://28danskedigtere.gyldendal.dk>), Forfatterstemmer.dk. and Field-sarkivet.dk – the latter is no longer (29 August 2017) available online, but the readings are documented in a dvd (Nielsen 2011).
- 3 In terms of literary history, the hotbed and inspiration for this explosion may be found in the Do-It-Yourself environment surrounding the journal Øverste Kirurgiske, first published in 1997, and in their monthly readings in Copenhagen, a series of readings that continued until 2015. It is an interesting part of Danish literary history that remains to be written.
- 4 See my reading of Maja Lucas's reading at Hald Hovedgaard in May 2007, for an example of how a reading is able to deliberately use the undecidability that may be included under performative biographism (Serup, 2012, pp. 386-388).
- 5 See also Serup (2015, pp. 50-71) and Serup (2012), on which the present presentation draws. For more on *relational aesthetics*, see Nicolas Bourriaud's book of the same title (Bourriaud, 2001), and for a more specific discussion of relational aesthetics and literature, see Serup (2013b).
- 6 On the voice more generally as a technology, medium and event, see Connor (2000), Peters (2004), Dolar (2006), Kolesch and Krämer (2006), Neumark, Gibson and Van Leeuwen (2010), Olsson (2011). For more on the role of the voice and tone in relation to literature specifically, see Steffen Nielsen (2002), Engdahl (2004), Ngai (2005), Serup (2011), Stougaard Pedersen (2011, 2013, 2015), Røsing (2012, 2013) and Nyberg (2013). For a slightly more detailed outline of voice analyses in the literature, see Serup (2015, pp. 27-32), on which this presentation also to some extent draws. On the voice, with a focus on orality and performativity, see Barthes (1977), Ong (1982) and Bernstein (1998), and regarding some of what the voice says which is not words, see Connor (2014).
- 7 'When I put my ear to the page, I hear nothing but the sound of my hair against the surface. If I erase the letters, no "sound" remains. Sound is not on the page, even if a graphic transmission allows for its properties to be noted for reproduction in mental or verbal rendering' (Drucker, 2009, p. 239).
- 8 'The Yellow Pages Ads' is available here: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Yellow-Pages.php#TV>.
- 9 Goldsmith's songs are available here: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Goldsmith.html> – Goldsmith (and probably also Llambías) is likely to have been directly inspired by the American conceptual artist John Baldessari's work from 1972, where he sings Sol LeWitt's famous *Sentences on Conceptual Art*. I would like to thank Kamilla Jørgensen for reminding me about Baldessari, who can be seen and heard here: [http://www.ubu.com/film/baldessari\\_lewitt.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/baldessari_lewitt.html)
- 10 Here you can see Llambías perform his letter to the tax authorities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yD5zzk7B4>
- 11 For an introduction to conceptual literature, Vanessa Place, and readings of several of her works, see e.g. Serup (2013a, 2015a, 2015b, pp. 20, 60-63, 72-108, 169-174, 217-235).
- 12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifgDcYQvD4>
- 13 Compare e.g. Roubaud's binary poem and reading to Martin Larsen's, which is available here: <http://bit.ly/291CWJN> – and is a realisation of this text from *Hvis jeg var kunstner [If I was an artist]*: 'If I was an artist I would create a sound poem consisting of letters from this sentence translated using the ASCII system into binary code' (Larsen, 2010, p. 112). See also Larsen's comment (in Danish) on Roubaud's poem (as a direct reaction of the present reading of it) here: <http://zonet.blogspot.dk/2016/07/martin-glaz-serup-skrev-til-mig-om.html>
- 14 See e.g. <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/16498/auto/0/0/Jacques-Roubaud/LIFE-SONNET> – where two versions of the poem (the French original and the English translation) are placed next to each other. Here also can be found the reading of

the poem on which the present reading is based. As is often the case with live readings, the performed poem deviates slightly from the text of the written poem.

15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtIEe8FU8vY>

16 For more on remediation, see e.g. Bolter and Grusin (1999).

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