

## Special Editor's Column

### **Performance Literature and the Written Word: Lost in Transcription?**

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This volume examines performance and the phenomenon of performance literature in a highly comparative framework. Literatures around the world, both in the past and in contemporary times, were and are experienced through live performance. This is true in the West, but even more so in non-Western societies. Performance involves engagement, audience, emotion; and performance literature therefore cannot be understood without its audience and social or religious context. This remains the case even when there are written texts that represent some or all of the words. In the modern Western world we are now used to experiencing literature primarily from reading silently, and despite theater and poetry readings, the dominant idea of proper literature in academic circles is of something preserved permanently upon the written page (and scholars therefore start with the written text). This is not the case in most literatures of the non-Western world, or of the pre-nineteenth century in the West; nor is it the case for contemporary popular youth culture, the world over, where song and the iPod are now constant companions. "Performance literature," literature meant primarily to be experienced in performance, is the subject of this volume of *Oral Tradition*.

Performance literature was the theme of a series of four intense and intensely exciting two- and three-day workshops held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, between July 2001 and May 2003. They were part of a still more ambitious enterprise with its focus firmly on Oriental and African literatures, the eight workshops of the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for Asian and African Literatures based in the School of Oriental and African Studies and University College London. For two years the Literature and Performance Workshop, whose project leaders were Drew Gerstle and myself, had a regular core of participants, many of whom were based in London or were leading scholars in their fields from outside London and outside the United Kingdom: most were specialists in one or another African or Asian

literature—historians, anthropologists, and literary specialists—or historians and literary scholars of a pre-modern European society with comparable interests. Of the former group, all were “hands-on” specialists with direct experience in the field. Themes and questions were formulated for each workshop, and ideas and research developed from one to the other. As entirely appropriate for workshops on performance literature, many papers played videos or tapes of performances; many papers were performances themselves—performances of words, but also in some cases of dance—and the sessions were far more visually or aurally engaging than most seminars on literature.<sup>1</sup> There was a palpable sense of excitement over the coming together in one room of specialists in so many different literatures and over the suggestive similarities and equally provocative differences between them. Papers, questions, and discussions sparked further questions. The articles in this and the next issue of *Oral Tradition* represent many—though by no means all—of the literatures discussed in the workshops, and while we cannot include the interventions of “discussants” and the spirit of the general discussion, the articles here have all been informed by them.

From Japan to Somalia, from Indian to Xhosa society, there are rich traditions of performance art and performance literature that often challenge Western categories and the assumptions of literary theory based on the European paradigm. Even in so literate and book-oriented a society as that of Japan, performance remained—and remains—central. While it is generally recognized that “oral” and “written” are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, those scholars most interested in the performance of literature outside drama are often studying oral literature.<sup>2</sup> As the performance literatures discussed in this issue indicate, it is inappropriate to approach performance literature in terms of a relatively simple division between written text and oral performance (though that has been productive in recent studies) or of any straight division between literacy and orality. As students of oral poetry, and readers of this journal in particular, are well aware, oral

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<sup>1</sup> See the Centre website for details of the research project, with a full list of papers, themes, and research questions for each workshop: [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html) and [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html).

<sup>2</sup> With the important exception of the relatively new discipline of Performance Studies, see most recently the books on oral literature by Lauri Honko (2000), Ruth Finnegan (1992), and John Miles Foley (1995 and 2002). This is not, of course, to underestimate the broader conceptualization of performance influenced by Erving Goffman (1969) and the universalizing theories about performance of Richard Schechner (2003).

poetry forces the critic to think particularly acutely about audience, society, reception, and tradition, all of which continue to give the oral poetry its force and meaning. Similarly, performance literature concentrates attention upon audience, audience reception, the social and cultural significance of the event itself, and the effect of audience upon performance as well as performance on audience. Performance literature and the performances themselves also generate other art forms, other publications, artistic or otherwise, or truncated, abbreviated memorials of the performance (most strikingly in Japan—see Gerstle 2000); it is paradoxical, or perhaps related, that these performances that vanish the minute they are finished are extraordinarily productive of further art forms and attempts to memorialize them. Performance literature is a stimulant for other activities. These further creations enable one to explore the continuing cultural and social importance of performance literature in a way that is not always possible with some forms of oral poetry in entirely oral societies.

These essays, then, explore the complex ways in which people try to capture performance literature, partially or completely, in written text, recordings, reading, and the visual arts. It is possible in many cases to examine the “gap” between performance and the written text—or other visual representation—in order to ask what is lost in transcription or what is gained in performance. Several articles investigate various attempts to represent or memorialize performances, whether indigenous to the society in question or anthropological and scientific (see the papers by Richard Schiefflin, Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel, and Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster). An interesting element is the connection between partial texts and the desire to keep the keys to performance in the hands of professional performers (du Perron and Magriel). Another important aspect is the phenomenon in some cultural traditions where the poems or songs were never written down, but where one is inclined to talk of “fixed texts,” though they are in essence oral texts (see Barber 2003 and Orwin 2003); what is raised here is not simply the familiar controversy about whether orally transmitted and performed poetry can be “fixed” or unchangeable, but rather the dynamics of each performance and the experiences or reactions of the audience within this tradition to what are clearly defined and recognizable genres.

We hope that this collection of articles will go some way toward concentrating, and further encouraging, attention on performance literature as a concept; to moving on from the ideas stimulated by important work on oral poetry (composed and performed entirely without writing), that performance is something that needs to be considered for oral literature but less pressingly for written literature. It also brings into serious consideration

the other elements of performance that are not reducible to “text” and words—for example, voice, intonation, dance, music, and visual effects, the elements that Ruth Finnegan in the forthcoming issue of *Oral Tradition* (20, ii) will call the multi-sensory effects of performance. The workshops were particularly effective in blurring the common disciplinary boundaries between the study of words and music. Among the articles below, Felicia Hughes-Freeland examines the way Javanese dance has been—and can be—represented in physical form, together with indigenous concepts of performance; Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel analyze the problems of recording north Indian art music; and Richard Schiefflin examines the anthropologist’s dilemma in trying to record and understand a performance when the audience and audience participation are in fact almost as central as the main performance itself and certainly influence it. Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster look at the once-radical new way of disseminating performances of rhetoric in the early recordings of speeches and the contemporaneous (and surprising) attitudes toward this new medium. Isolde Standish considers the mediation between traditional Japanese forms of performance and the Western cinema as the latter was initially adapted for Japanese audiences.

Several articles ask about the various ways in which people try, or have tried, to preserve or memorialize a performance—methods indigenous to the culture as contrasted to those of outsiders involving modern technology, anthropologists, politicians, Western musicologists (Schiefflin, Bauman and Feaster, du Perron and Magriel, and Hughes-Freeland)—and how the aims of such memorialization may relate to the methods used (many workshop papers in the next issue will deal with the visual representations of performance). What arises from this set of investigations are some answers to the perennial question: what in a performance can be preserved, recorded, or transcribed? What is lost forever? What are the limitations of various attempts at recording or retaining some memory of a performance? What is the gap between a performance and even a carefully scientific attempt to record it on paper (Schiefflin)? Moreover, for historians who cannot experience any live performances at all in the societies they study, such diverse comparisons are extremely helpful in delineating or widening the set of possibilities that they might envisage concerning the relation of written texts to performances (for instance, if the historian has only written texts remaining from once complex performances) or stimulating wider questions to ask based on their evidence. This is particularly instructive for ancient Greek society, for instance, where we know that poetry was heard and sung in performance and often at elaborately choreographed religious occasions, but where the development of classical scholarship has tended to concentrate

exclusively upon the written text as the object of literary criticism (see Thomas 1992 and Goldhill and Osborne 1999). In another essay in this issue Naoko Yamagata provides an interesting discussion of Plato's representation of, and reaction to, such performance culture in a period of rapid change in ancient Greece, and in particular his troubled relationship to the popular performances of the canonical poems of Homer in his time.

These articles, then, offer several answers even to so obvious a question as "what is the written text for?"—something often taken for granted by Western scholars. A study of performance literature shows the many ways in which written texts can relate to performance, the many different forms of textuality, and the relationships, sometimes within the same cultural tradition, that can grow between text, performance, and reperformance. Above all, we are left with the enduring and ubiquitous vitality of performance literatures all over the world. When a performance is so obviously something to be experienced live and in reality, why are there so many different ways, in different societies, of attempting to keep a memory or representation of performance? Why does it often seem immaterial that such representations do not necessarily repeat the text, the words, of the performance? The converse to this concern is also examined in the case of the "performance" of modern English poetry in poetry readings: in his contribution to the present issue, Peter Middleton tries to pin down and analyze what it is that makes such a performance still sought after in our text-based society, and what it is that a performance of such poetry adds to the bare text on the page.

We live in times of rapid technological change that is altering the ways in which we interact with each other and with literature and culture defined in the broadest terms. These essays and those that follow in the next issue raise various questions about the significance of performance literature and offer an array of case studies to show how performance has been and remains an essential element of the fabric of our cultural beings. The diversity of the participants and papers at the "Literature and Performance" workshops was both exhilarating and challenging. We hope that the essays will convey some of the excitement and challenging atmosphere that the workshops fostered.

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