

PERFORMANCE CRITICISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION¹

Part I: Oral Performance and New Testament Studies

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Introduction

Studies of the interaction of Orality and Biblical Studies have become frequent and insightful in recent years. I build on these rich discussions. In particular, I begin with an understanding of media in the first-century Mediterranean world as a complex interplay of orality and literacy in which communication was predominantly that of oral performance in community. Furthermore, this interplay of media results in a hybridism of the NT in which oral performances were at some point written down, resulting in oral-derived texts, while concurrently performances continued to be given. A discussion of the NT based on this understanding can be pursued from three perspectives: composition, transmission, and reception. Whereas helpful insights have been provided by studies of composition,² this paper looks more to transmission and reception, specifically as these relate to Bible translation today. Beyond form criticism, insights have been gained in the research of oral qualities found within NT texts by Oral Biblical Criticism. Such research has been extended by the foundational two-part article by David Rhoads on the subject of Performance Criticism.³ My intent in Part I of this article is to summarize selected studies of the first-century NT context of orality and outline Performance Criticism.

1 This essay is a condensed synthesis of several chapters from my dissertation, "Bible Translation as Contextualization: The Role of Oral Performance in New Testament and African Contexts" (Ph.D. diss., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2008). The dissertation is to be published as *From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible* (Eugene: Cascade Books, forthcoming). Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Society for New Testament Studies section "Oral Culture, New Testament, and Bible Translation" in Sibiu, Romania, in August 2007 and the Society of Biblical Literature section "Bible in Ancient and Modern Media," in San Diego, Calif., November, 2007.

2 For example, Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making* (vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); idem, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 139-75.

3 David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 36.3 (2006): 1-16; idem, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part II," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 36.4 (2006): 164-84.

Interplay of writing and orality

John Miles Foley includes the NT in a category of oral poetry in regard to a communication spectrum: voices from the past.⁴ He argues that oral poetry be understood as communication that is immanently linked to oral tradition.⁵ Foley's spectrum permits biblical scholars to problematize the oral-written interface of the NT, a view that circumvents a great-divide discussion. Furthermore, it broadens the definition of poetry beyond the ethnocentric metric verse much in the same way that Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, and Richard Bauman problematize the notion of prose with Native American folktales.⁶

The communication context of first-century Mediterranean cultures is complex. Numerous book-length studies have corrected assumptions about widespread literacy.⁷ In terms of the communication environment and its relation to NT studies, the following table provides several choices of terminology to discuss the communicative interplay of the written and oral.⁸

Table 1
Literacy-Orality Continua⁹

	Havelock (Literacy)	Boomershine (Media)	Ong (Orality)	Loubser (Culture)	Robbins (Culture)
100 C.E.	Script-literate	Manuscript	Residually Oral	Intermediate manuscript culture	Rhetorical ¹⁰

4 John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 39. Four components of oral poetry are mentioned by Foley: poetic line (instead of prose paragraphs); genre or poetic specific (to avoid ethnocentric prescription); oral-written continuum (to avoid great-divide theory); chronological interplay of media (ibid., 29-30).

5 John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

6 Dell Hymes, *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Dennis Tedlock, *Finding the Center: The Art of the Zuni Storyteller* (2d ed.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); idem, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

7 William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Rosalind Thomas, *Key Themes in Ancient History: Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); R. A. Derrenbacker, Jr., *Ancient Compositional Practices and the Synoptic Problem* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005); Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 It is recognized that such a presentation simplifies the diverse communication environments that differ due to geographic, linguistic, and social complexities.

9 Adapted from John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 38. Loubser addition from J. A. (Bobby) Loubser, "Reconciling Rhetorical Criticism with Its Oral Roots," *Neotestamentica* 35.1-2 (2001): 95-110 (99). Robbins addition from "Oral, Rhetorical, Literary Cultures: A Response," *Semeia* 65 (1995): 75-91 (77); idem, "Interfaces of Orality and Literature in the Gospel of Mark," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark* (ed. Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 125-46.

10 Vernon Robbins suggests a continuum within a rhetorical culture in terms of intertextuality: reference, recitation, recontextualization, reconfiguration, and echo ("Oral, Rhetorical, and Literary Cultures," 82-88).

I suggest that the communication setting for the NT can be described as predominantly oral.¹¹ Yet as we have noted above, predominantly oral does not exclude literacy. Written manuscripts circulated and were communally communicated. Written inscriptions were present and symbolized authority. Nevertheless the implications for the ubiquitous role of orality has been underemphasized in biblical studies to the point where Kelber sought to enliven the discussion with a hyperbolic claim to Mark's written gospel as distinctive from the oral context. However, the more nuanced interaction of writing and orality is recognized as more appropriate.¹² Despite the potential misunderstanding of the term "oral" as exclusive from written, it seems appropriate to me to counteract the print-bias assumptions of modernity by asserting the clear oral bias of the first century.¹³ Understanding this bias permits a view of the NT as orally derived. The oral character of the NT—even when in written form—is discernible as indicated by the numerous studies on the oral features, patterning, and structures of NT compositions that demonstrate Oral Biblical Criticism.¹⁴

Contributions to NT research on performance

The study of NT oral performances has benefited from the research of two sets of biblical scholars. Representing one set, Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper research the social-religious-political traditions behind the oral performances that are still reflected in oral-derived texts.¹⁵ Whitney Shiner and William Shiell are representative of the second set as they apply two methods of research: the historical study of documented performances that were contemporary with NT

11 This is the terminology used by Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I," 6.

12 Robbins suggests that this interplay be understood in regards to the setting for the NT as a "rhetorical culture" rather than an oral culture (Vernon K. Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition and pre-Gospel Traditions: A New Approach," in *The Synoptic Gospels* [ed. Camille Focant; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993], 116; idem, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996]; idem, "Oral, Rhetorical, Literary Cultures"; idem, "Interfaces of Orality"). In these last two references, Robbins presents a continuum in which "rhetorical culture" is placed: 1) oral, 2) scribal, 3) rhetorical, 4) reading, 5) literary, 6) print, 7) hypertext—affirming rhetorical as the most appropriate understanding of Mark's context. Several other NT scholars opt for this terminology: John D. Harvey, "Orality and Its Implications for Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm," *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002): 99-109; Holly E. Hearon, "The Implications of Orality for Studies of the Biblical Text," in Horsley, Draper, and Foley, *Performing the Gospel*, 3-20; Whitney Shiner, "Memory Technology and the Composition of Mark," in Horsley, Draper, and Foley, *Performing the Gospel*, 147-65. Loubser also presents his continuum of orality-literacy based on the core issue of a manuscript culture, so that pre-first century would be understood as a low manuscript culture and by the second century it would be described as high manuscript culture. The first century of Mark's context is described by Loubser as intermediate manuscript culture (J. A. Loubser, "What is Biblical Media Criticism? A Media-critical Reading of Luke 9:51-56," *Scriptura* 80.2 [2002]: 206-19; idem, *Orality and Manuscript Culture in the Bible: Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament—Explorative Hermeneutics* [Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sun Press, 2007]).

13 Hearon acknowledges the interplay of the written and oral and thus accepts in part the term "rhetorical culture." However, she also acknowledges a distinction of the two media by noting the evanescence of the oral and the fixity of the written (*The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* [Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2004], 14-15).

14 Bernard Brandon Scott and Margaret E. Dean, "A Sound Map of the Sermon on the Mount," in *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press), 672-725; John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); Casey Wayne Davis, *Oral Biblical Criticism: The Influence of the Principles of Orality on the Literary Structure of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

15 Richard A. Horsley with Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

compositions and the internal research of the biblical compositions for clues within the text of how these performances were made.¹⁶

Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper

The use of media must be understood ideologically. Horsley recognizes two distinct approaches to orality-literacy studies.¹⁷ He laments the lack of ideological analysis of the issues: "Even these studies generally lack analysis of the social location of orality and the uses of literacy and the power relations involved, which is necessary to accomplish anything more than an appreciation of particular literary documents of relatively high culture."¹⁸ Horsley understands that the very low literacy rate of first-century Palestine, nevertheless, only served the uppermost strata of society. Writing was symbolic with epitaphs on monuments and tombstones, whereby the passerby could "hear" the words of the one memorialized in the words of stone. The State's use of writing was primarily symbolic as well. Engraved laws were displayed "to cultivate authority and to intimidate their citizens."¹⁹ Record keeping was used by the military for taxes and tracking debts. In terms of the religious documents of the period, Horsley asserts that the Hebrew Scriptures functioned in many ways as the Greek and Roman law inscriptions: "to legitimate and authorize the centralization of political-religious power."²⁰

Jonathan Draper is also keenly interested in the social function of the oral structure of biblical texts. Like Horsley he uses the findings of anthropologists like Dell Hymes as well as the insights of John Miles Foley as he restructures the text in order to determine more clearly the metonymic references within the oral-derived text.²¹ In his research on Q, Draper shows how the structure of a discourse can be presented with the use of lines, verses, and stanzas. Such typographical restructuring aligns related elements of the text in a more perceptible way than the traditional paragraph style of prose. The result of this first step is a presentation of the oral patterning of the biblical composition. The second step involves determining the metonymic references contained within these patterns. Following Foley, Draper asserts that a close study of the traditions of the first century as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures and other extracanonical resources permits a greater appreciation for the social meanings of the texts. His example from Q 12.49-59, where Jesus speaks of his casting fire on the earth, is helpful. Rather than understanding this as an apocalyptic proclamation, Draper interprets the

16 Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance in Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003); William David Shiell, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

17 Horsley employs Brian Street's taxonomy: "Researchers dissatisfied with the autonomous model of literacy and with the assumptions outlined above, have come to view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and to recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts" (Brian Street, "Introduction: New Literacy Studies," in *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy* [ed. Brian Street; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 4; Richard A. Horsley, "The Oral Communication Environment of Q," in Horsley and Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, 123-49).

18 Horsley, "The Oral Communication Environment of Q," 124-5.

19 *Ibid.*, 130.

20 *Ibid.*, 135.

21 Jonathan A. Draper, "Recovering Oral Performance from Written Text in Q," in Horsley and Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, 175-94. Draper also demonstrates this approach to discovering the "hidden transcripts" of biblical passages in "Practicing the Presence of God in John: Ritual Use of Scripture and the *Eidos Theou* in John 5:37," in *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 155-68.

image of fire as a metonymic sign from the Hebrew Scriptures of God's judgment to those who break his covenant. Draper further extrapolates that the breaking of God's covenant in this case is the exploitation by Jerusalem's leaders of the marginalized peasants. The two-step method of reconstructing the oral patterning in preparation for interpreting the metonymic reference is a significant contribution to Oral Biblical Criticism.

Whitney Shiner and William Shiell

Both Whitney Shiner and William Shiell demonstrate the historical research of Greco-Roman communication in the first centuries of Christianity. A wide continuum of performances were presented: private readings (mostly in wealthy contexts); public readings (Olympic games, Hippodrome); storytelling (women allowed to participate; for general audiences; perceived by the wealthy as potentially crude); novels (whole books read with the wealthy, but a question as to whether popular literature ever existed at this time); drama (theater was attended by common folks; banned by later Christian theologians, but probably still attended); pantomime (included a masked dancer, and a storyteller); poetry (often accompanied by lyre music, performance more notable than composition); epics (emotional portrayals at Olympic games of Homer's works). Mark's Gospel, according to Shiner, was more than likely dramatically performed in a house setting, or perhaps outdoors at a religious ceremony.²² The gestures and paralinguistic features of the performance are inferred from the rhetorical schools of the day. Shiner and Shiell's research of Quintillian's *Institutio Oratoria*, Pseudo-Cicero (*Ad Herenium*), Cicero, Pliny, sculptures, paintings, and illustrations—specifically those found with Terence's comedies—orient us to how a performer was expected to follow certain social guidelines for performance. As Shiell summarizes,

This chapter has identified the Greco-Roman conventions under three main categories: gestures, facial expression, and vocal inflection. These elements were combined when an orator imitated another character using the conventions of *prosōpopoiia*. Just as an artist visualized a sculpture before he fashioned the piece, so a performer in the Greco-Roman world visualized the appropriate places where he employed gestures, facial expression, and vocal inflection. An audience heard the text performed and saw these conventions enacted, reinforcing the meaning of the work.²³

Shiner and Shiell also provide evidence for the textual clues for performance. Shiner does a brief study of the opening verses of Mark. He recognizes the appealing use of alliterations and assonances in these opening lines that are intended to prepare the audience to be receptive to the story by means of subtle rhythms and lexical harmonies. Shiner suggests that Mark includes "applause lines" that indicate when a first-century audience was expected to applaud in response to the performance: "substance of a speech; florid verbal style; extravagant delivery."²⁴ Applause is expected in Mark: when Jesus triumphs over enemies (or when the enemies' behavior is publicly exhibited); epigrams of Jesus as he closes off sections; pauses (with multiple performances, these places are negotiated with the audience and Mark could be the result of several performance negotiations of where pauses

22 Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 37-56.

23 Shiell, *Reading Acts*, 100.

24 Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 154.

are placed most effectively). The episodic style of Mark enhances these places for applause as there are short sections with possible breaks and the closings of many sections end with an epigram.²⁵ Shiell recognizes how gestures within the book of Acts are an indication as to how the performer was to gesture. “The six passages in Acts (12.17; 13.16; 19.33; 21.40; 24.10; 26.1) use four different kinds of gestures: to silence a crowd, to signal the beginning of a speech, to begin an exordium in judicial speech, and to signal permission for someone else to speak.”²⁶ The focus on gesture expands research beyond the literary dramatization of initial events to how such events were later communicated dramatically to other audiences. This expansion of study benefits from a focused look at oral performance by means of Performance Criticism.

Performance Criticism

Performance Criticism broadens and deepens the understanding of communication in relation to the NT. Not only was the first-century context predominantly oral and ideologically charged, but the communication was embodied and experienced in community. Citing a website for Performance Criticism, the following responses are made to the question, “What is Performance Criticism?”²⁷

- **Conceiving the Bible within the oral cultures** of the early church, aspects of which include the performance event, performer, audience, context, and text.
- **Incorporating methods and results from other disciplines**, including Historical Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Form and Genre Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Textual Criticism, Orality Criticism, Speech Act Theory, Social-Science Criticism, Linguistic Criticism, The Art of Translation, Ideological Criticism, Theater Studies, and Oral Interpretation Studies.
- **Analyzing biblical texts** through the translation, preparation, and performance of a text for group discussion of the performance event.
- **Fostering performance as effective communication** of the Bible in the modern world.

Performance Event

The previous section presented a historical setting of the media used in the first-century Mediterranean world; it was a context predominantly oral. Furthermore, this communicative context was communal in that such communications as the NT narratives and letters were not received individually but communally. These are essential points to a reconstruction of first-century performance scenarios. This fundamental background, although acknowledged in other biblical criticisms, has been consistently under-emphasized as the result of an established literary bias in previous studies of the NT. This lacuna promotes anachronistic analyses of these NT compositions and their reception. Moreover, this literary bias is prevalent in the imagination of how people are to engage in the Bible today. In other words, the neglect of the predominant oral ethos of both the first-century Mediterranean world and the modern world—whether in the secondary orality of the electronic age or the cultures where literacy plays a minor part in daily life—has inhibited reflection of the Bible as a collection of performance-oriented compositions. Performance

²⁵ Ibid., 156-8.

²⁶ Shiell, *Reading Acts*, 139.

²⁷ www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org, accessed August 25, 2008.

Criticism addresses this bias and the resulting gaps in both the first and twenty-first century contexts. Central to Performance Criticism is the performance event, including: the act of performing, composition for performance, performer, audience, material context, social-historical circumstances, and rhetorical impact.²⁸

Act of performing

The recently established Oral Biblical Criticism parallels much of Performance Criticism's concern with the predominantly oral ethos of the first-century Mediterranean world. Yet even a close study of the written words of biblical compositions does not fully perceive the paralinguistic features of the human voice: rhythm, intonation, degrees of loudness, variation in voice quality, pausing, and phrasing.²⁹ However, Performance Criticism extends the communicative mode beyond simply that of oral-aural, beyond a disembodied voice. Performances of these biblical compositions were not only heard, but visualized; they were embodied by a performer. Performance goes beyond hearing the sounds to seeing the performer's posture, gestures, facial expressions, and the performer's proximity to the audience. The performer becomes the medium for the performance event.

Composition for performance

The challenge for Performance Criticism is to imagine what a first-century performance was like, given that all that remains of the performance is a limited text. However limited, the written text still contains hints of the performance. These hints can be overt when it comes to certain lexical themes and phonological alliterations. The text may also include hints of stage directions that indicate the movement, vocal quality, or emotional state of the performer, as well as the expected state of the audience. Nonetheless, the biblical texts that we have were not transcribed with all the details of a scripted performance that we might hope for.³⁰

Performer

The performance event places the performer as the medium of the message. As recognized years ago, "the medium is the message."³¹ Moreover, the performer is an interpreter of the message. Objectivity is not possible; denial of this is unhelpful and can be interpreted as an attempt to obscure a latent agenda. When one attempts to reconstruct the NT performance settings, there is an appreciation of the relationship that the composer of the message has with the one who performs it. Besides the actual text transcribed, we can understand the first-century performer

²⁸ These are the components of the performance event presented by Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I," 9–14.

²⁹ M. A. K. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30.

³⁰ This is the same predicament that folklorists find themselves in with earlier transcribed narratives. They face the challenge of oral performance that is a mirrored image of NT exegetes and translators. That is, whereas folklorists seek to extend their transcription beyond that of simply words when recording an oral performance, it is these very skeletal transcriptions with which NT scholars are left when seeking to research oral performances. This challenge became the impetus for the development of ethnopoetics (discussed below) whereby attempts are made to discover via the remnants of transcriptions the performance-directed text (Annekie Joubert, *The Power of Performance* [Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2004], 131).

³¹ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967).

being coached as to how to place emphasis, how to appreciate the audience's responses, how to elaborate sections of the message if needed, and so on.³²

Audience

The performance is experienced by the audience communally, not individually. This is not a passive reception but an active participation. Audiences are actively participating in the performance, influencing the performer, responding to the performer, verbally or nonverbally, at times joining in the role of performer themselves. It is often the response of the audience that marks the effectiveness of the performer. As is the case with the performer, the social location(s) of the audience is determinative of the performance. Issues of gender, race, religion, nationality, class, and so on, are not abstract concepts in performance. They are embodied in the performers and audiences and play considerable roles in the content and manner in which something is performed and interpreted.

Material context

The physical locale or material context of the performance affects the performance. Whether this is temporal, spatial, or relational, the environment in which the performance takes place participates in the performance. A first-century house community shapes the performance differently than a public forum. In modern performances, a cramped classroom changes the dynamics of performance when compared to a spacious auditorium. The lighting, the acoustics, the distractions—each contributes to the performance event.

Social-Historical circumstances

Broadening the notion of context beyond the material, Performance Criticism recognizes the social context's critical role in performance. The oppressive context of the Roman Empire has been significantly ignored until recent years. The Greco-Roman religious influences offer important insights into NT conflicts and assertions. These social and historical realities were the presupposed backdrops of performers and their audiences. Foley has encouraged us to go beyond structural issues of a performance to issues of the significance beyond the words, kinetics, and paralinguistic features of the performance.³³ The worlds of meaning are discovered through socio-cultural research. In the case of biblical performances, historical studies and Social-Science Criticism are crucial to understanding the dynamics at play in the first century. Without such research, projections of other dynamics, often our own, will disfigure these socio-historical realities. This has clearly been the case when biblical research has assumed that communication in the first century was similar to the literary, print communication of today.

Rhetorical impact

The aim of the performance is transformation. This may result in a confirmed identity of the community. Or, the performance may seek change by evoking within the audience the desire and capacity to change. With such transformation in mind, performance is not limited to what it might mean, but what it does.³⁴ As

32 Pieter Botha, "Letter Writing and Oral Communication in Antiquity: Suggested Implications for the Interpretation of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *Scriptura* 42 (1992): 17-34.

33 Foley, *Immanent Art*.

34 Rhoads, "Performance Criticism—Part I," 13.

Rhoads states, “Put another way, what does a story or a letter lead the audience to become—such that they are different people in the course of and as a result of experiencing the performance?”³⁵ This experience was often due to the emotional force of performances. Whitney Shiner places critical stress on the value of emotion in first-century performances: “The success of verbal art was often judged by the way it affected the emotions of the listeners.”³⁶

Performance Criticism’s interaction with other disciplines

Performance Criticism is admittedly eclectic. It is informed by several well-established biblical criticisms as well as some recent contributions to biblical research. Performance Criticism does not attempt to eclipse these important methodologies but it does hope to contribute by reframing them. Arguing against a subordination of Performance Criticism under an already established field, Rhoads states, “However, precisely because performance criticism is an eclectic discipline bringing together many different methods already employed in Second Testament studies, it would be advantageous to treat performance criticism as a discrete discipline.”³⁷ The reconceptualization of these other disciplines is yet to be fully imagined. Rhoads himself presents several suggestions to the existing methodologies.³⁸ I have already indicated above how Performance Criticism might begin to reframe Orality, Historical, Social-Science criticisms. Following the lead of Foley and his reworking of Iser’s Receptionalism, I discuss more closely below how Performance Criticism might reconceptualize Reader-Response Criticism. In a similar reworking, I look at how Performance Criticism might reframe Ukpong and West’s work with Inculturation Hermeneutics and Ordinary Readers, a reframing that addresses issues of Ideological Criticism. Following Foley and other performance researchers, I discuss below how ethnopoetics can inform Performance Criticism.

Audience-Response Criticism

Performance Criticism’s understanding of the active participation by an audience suggests incorporating a type of Receptionalism that understands that meaning is not unilaterally determined by the text’s or performer’s intent. Instead, the understanding of a performance, its significance, is at least partially determined by the audience.³⁹ Foley recognizes the usefulness of Receptionalism for oral performance: “the oral performance or oral-derived text also consists of a ‘map’ made up of explicit signals and gaps of indeterminacy that must be bridged in accordance with certain rules and predispositions.”⁴⁰ Thus the primary contribution of Audience-Response Criticism is the claim that a listening audience

35 Ibid., 14.

36 Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 57.

37 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism—Part II,” 165.

38 Ibid., 165-73.

39 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); John A. Daar, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

40 Foley, *Immanent Art*, 43. Foley cites Bauman in footnote seven: “The focus is on the role of the reader, no longer as a passive receiver of the meaning inherent in the text, but as an active participant in the actualization—indeed, the production—of textual meaning as an interpretive accomplishment, much like the members of an oral storytelling audience” (Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 113).

is participatory to the making of meaning. More is communicated than simply what is said. An audience infers meaning at important “gaps of indeterminacies.” Robert Fowler states the commonalities of a wide variety of approaches subsumed under Reader-Response Criticism: “a critical model of the reading experience which itself has two major aspects: (1) an understanding of reading as a dynamic, concrete, temporal experience, instead of the abstract perception of a spatial form; and (2) an emphasis on meaning as event instead of meaning as content.”⁴¹ These aspects lead Fowler to express the act of reading in terms that are very similar to the experiential, temporal, and event-oriented nature of performance. These insights become more understandable, and more powerful, in the context of performance. Reader-Response’s abstract presentation of event becomes a concrete experience of an event that takes place between a performer and an audience. Participants experience in person the performance in a communal setting where performer and audience interact in real time. Such interaction provides opportunities for impact upon performer, audience, and message.

Ideological Criticism

Colonialism’s equating of orality with primitiveness or illiteracy demonstrates the power issues involved in Bible translation.⁴² For the past several centuries Bible translation has been understood as a literary enterprise. Performance Criticism questions this dominance. Oral performance is a component of all cultures as it interfaces to varying degrees with literacy. The authoritative text in literacy becomes the authoritative tradition in oral performance. Viewed through Performance Criticism, the authority of the (translated) Bible must be re-examined to consider the sources of authority beyond a written text. It is this profound difference of performer-text-audience participation that leads me to understand that the act of translation and the performance of a performance-oriented translation are sites of interpretation. Whereas postcolonial views interpret Bible translation as a text-bound tool of dominance, I am beginning to understand that Performance Criticism presents biblical translation as an act of liberation and inculturation.⁴³ It is a liberation that underscores the agency of the audience and the performer, along with the biblical text, thus being communal. Performance Criticism’s contribution to biblical translation also offers fresh insights into inculturation that has the capacity to invigorate local theologies according to the linguistic-cultural categories of the local context. I suggest that these possibilities could be greatly enhanced with an intentional application of Performance Criticism to both biblical exegesis and translation.

African theologians have clearly articulated responses to various forms of oppression and colonialism. Justin Ukpong and Gerald West have responded with similar approaches to the incorporation of “ordinary readers” into biblical

41 Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 25.

42 Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); idem, *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Southern Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

43 John and Jean Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); idem, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Randall C. Bailey and Tina Pippen, eds., *Semeia 76* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

reflections.⁴⁴ They have overtly made issues of social location a crucial site for interpretation. Although both of these African scholars admit that “reader” should be understood to encompass non-literates, it is this devaluing of orality, and specifically oral performance, that motivates me to suggest how Performance Criticism could be incorporated into their existing methodologies and research. Whereas the procedure for working with ordinary readers involves a trained biblical scholar and at least one person capable of reading the biblical text, I suggest that a communal encounter of the biblical composition through performance would be more effective. Such an exercise would involve a group of people who double as performer and the audience for other performers. The biblical text would be initially studied, discussing the social-historical issues of that particular text. Elements of the orality of the text and the various performance issues would likewise be discussed. Whereas the historical performance would initiate the conversation, the group would discuss the local context’s own performance styles that could replicate or at least be complementary to the first-century performance. As performers memorize and perform this composition, adjusting it to their contexts, there would be time after each performance to discuss the rhetorical effects, the insights gained, and the communication challenges of the performance. These discussions would inform other performances as the original group performed these compositions in other settings.

Ethnopoetics

Ethnopoetics developed due to the ethnocentrism of researchers from North America and Europe who narrowly defined poetry in literary terms. Even when the study of oral performances began to increase, following the work of Parry and Lord and their study of Homeric and South Slavic epics, researchers ethnocentrically attempted to force other epics and oral performance genres into the Slavic epic model.⁴⁵ This double-ethnocentrism was challenged with the work of Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Richard Bauman, and eventually John Miles Foley. Bauman defines ethnopoetics in this way: “centrally concerned with the aesthetic patterning of oral literary forms and the problems of translating and rendering them in print in such a way that the artistry of their oral performance is not lost.”⁴⁶ Their first discovery was that narratives in verbal art can be marked by different oral characteristics than the metric line. Folklorists questioned the transcription and grouping of Native American verbal art into paragraphs and suggested rather a

44 Gerald West, “Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourse of the Dominated,” *Semeia* 73 (1996): 21-42; idem, “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface Between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy,” in *Redirected Travel: Alternative Journeys and Places in Biblical Studies* (ed. R. Boer and E. Conrad; Sheffield: Continuum/Sheffield Academic Press, 2003); Justin S. Ukpong, “Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bible in a World Context* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); idem, “Bible Reading with a Community of Ordinary Readers,” in *Interpreting the NT in Africa* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpong; Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 188-212; idem, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

45 Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I: Homer and Homeric Style,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930): 73-147; idem, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. II: The Homeric Language as the Language of Oral Poetry,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 43 (1932): 1-50; idem, “Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Songs,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 64 (1933): 179-97. Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy; 2d ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000; 1st ed. 1960).

46 Richard Bauman, “Folklore,” in Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, 39.

line presentation that unveils the oral poetry. This re-presentation in writing of oral performance was not limited to lines, but soon numerous methods of notation of paralinguistic features and gestures were introduced. How does this development of ethnopoetics inform Performance Criticism? Whereas Hymes and Tedlock seek to represent justly oral performances with a written script, biblical scholars begin with a limited transcript of biblical performances.⁴⁷ Hymes' approach to reworking nineteenth-century performance transcripts of Native American folklore parallels the challenge that performance critics face. An implementation of this method in relation to Performance Criticism will be found in Part II in *Table 2: Script for Mark 1.40-45* (forthcoming in the July 2009 issue of *BT*).

Performance as method

Performance Criticism does not limit its domain of study to historical research of first-century NT oral performances. The domain is expanded with attention paid to present-day performances of biblical compositions for live audiences. Alongside historical and literary methods of researching biblical performance, a third method is central to Performance Criticism: the translation, preparation, and performance of these compositions. Rhoads suggests that Performance Criticism is not only the objective study of performance, but that the actual performance of biblical texts is a justified method of interpretation. Two important preliminary points need to be made: whereas others (e.g., Shiner) attempt to imitate first-century performances in their own performance, the style of performance discussed here is modern, twenty-first century performance of the ancient text. Secondly, the language of performance is generally not the original biblical language.⁴⁸ The reasoning for both of these points is that the sensibilities of an audience today are different than in the first century.⁴⁹

From my own experience with performance, I can say that performances push me as a critic to ask questions that would not have come to me had I been studying the text silently, through reading. Furthermore, what was I to do with my hands, my posture, my facial expressions, my proximity to the audience? Could these all remain neutral throughout? My current project is the preparation and performance of Mark's Gospel. As a way to speed up the preparation for performance, I began with Rhoads' translation, knowing that his style of translation already considered performance.⁵⁰ However, I have revised this translation as I gain experience in performance. My consideration of the effect of words upon an American audience has led me to change certain phrases. This dynamic nature of translation demonstrates the participation by the audience in performance, both in anticipation for the performance and during the performance. The sheer number of hours spent in memorization permits a depth of knowledge of the story that might not occur with multiple readings of the Gospel. It soon became apparent that

47 As described above in the section on Jonathan Draper, both Draper and Horsley utilize ethnopoetic studies in their work (see, for example, Horsley and Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me* and Horsley, *Oral Performance*).

48 This being said, I have nevertheless experimented with biblical performance in the Greek language of the NT. Earlier in my research, I memorized for performance in Greek Paul's letter to Philemon and the pericope of 1 Cor 15.1-11.

49 Shiner talks about a "bombastic" style of antiquity, a style that would tend to alarm or distance a modern audience (rather than build community) (Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 88).

50 David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 8-38.

there was an overlap of subject matter from one episode to the next. Themes were forecast and later echoed in entirely different pericopes. I was no longer thinking about the separation of passages by spatial distance—one paragraph or one or more pages separating parts of the story. I was thinking temporally: how much time elapses between connecting themes? The composition with these forecasts and echoes facilitated my memory of the successive episodes. After the memorization of the words was accomplished, interpretations were furthered as I considered the use of silence. Where did the pauses occur? Their placement drastically changes the potential interpretations. As mentioned above, I was faced with a myriad of questions on what to do with my gestures, posture, facial expressions, and my placement on the stage. Sometimes these gestures are predictable from the text, as when Jesus “stretched out his hand” to the leper. Facial expressions and tone of voice can be predicted from phrases such as “looking around at them with anger, grieved at the hardening of their minds.” The first eight chapters of Mark are divided between Jesus by the sea and Jesus away from the sea. Performing these scenes required me to choose a side of the stage for the sea and the other side for events occurring in synagogues, villages, or deserted places. This became a mnemonic device not only for me as the performer but also for the audience. Rhoads has indicated that there are over fifty different characters in Mark’s Gospel.⁵¹ Some of these characters are to have distinctive speaking styles: demons who are screaming out, a synagogue leader who is pleading urgently for the healing of their daughter, a woman who cleverly challenges Jesus’ proverb. Each of these requires a certain tone of voice, a cadence of speech, accompanied by supporting gestures and postures. Such decisions are required not only of a modern performer, but we can assert that first-century performers of these biblical compositions were also required to make such performative choices.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above sections, Performance Criticism seeks to engage in both exegesis and hermeneutics. In fact the methodology foregrounds a hermeneutical circle that seeks historical accuracy and responds to the communicative necessities of performance. The performer attempts to portray a composition that is accurate in its exegesis yet at the same time requires the presence of an audience. As a medium, the performer does not contain the entire meaning but is her- or himself shaped by and responds to the community’s participation in the performance. This communal shaping feeds back into the exegetical process whereby we recognize the agency of both performer and audience in the hermeneutical circle.

I seek to pursue in Part II of this paper the implications of this methodology of Performance Criticism for Bible translation. I suggest some reframing of established biblical criticisms as anticipated by understanding the NT genres as types of oral performances. Such reframing incorporates substantively the insights gained by sociolinguists and folklorists. In relation to Bible translation, this involves a reworking of presupposed communication models and subsequently translation theories informed by such models. These theoretical discussions are illustrated by the description of an experience of translation for performance in the central African context with the Vuté people of Cameroon.

51 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism—Part II,” 176.