

PHOTONIC PROSODY

[A talk presented at the Meridian Gallery in San Francisco as part of the “Poetics of Healing” symposium curated by Eleni Stecopoulos, 2008.]

Loss of coherence [of cell assemblies’ collective vibration] can lead to disease and disorder.¹

—Herbert Fröhlich

I’m sure you’ve all heard about the inadequacy of language. I’d like to remedy this fallacy, here and now, once and for all, again and again.

In this symposium on the Poetics of Healing my brief talk will focus, not on poetics, but on prosody. I’ll call it ‘Photonic Prosody.’ By *photonic* I mean ‘vibratory,’ if not ‘cosmogenic.’ I’ll present a few of the most basic elements of prosody at such a rudimentary level they become key to our composition and the basis of our ability to be well.

When Eleni Stecopoulos invited me to speak about poetry and healing she gave me two directives. The first directive was simply: “I press you to be obvious.” The second directive—a de facto challenge to the first directive—

was a request to deal with the habitual reference to and reliance upon ‘catharsis’ as the therapeutic mechanism of art. Neither Eleni nor I typically use the word ‘healing’ in relation to poetry (though for the purposes of this talk I’ll use *healing* as often as I credibly can). I believe her second directive comes from a need to admit the healing properties of poetry without limiting what those properties are. Cathartic experience—release of emotion as relief from emotion, as in Freudian talking cure—is crucial for healing. Yet, each point I present will extend the ways in which poetry may heal, moving toward poetry’s full efficacy. She and I are perhaps weary of pathology—wary of knowing primarily through pathology—without at once proposing a body or poetry that calls for our well-being from a place of being well. So, by adhering to her double-directive, I’ll attempt to break free from limited, chronic impressions of the power of poetry.

PROSODY

First, I’ll simply mention that the science of poetry known as ‘prosody’ only ever came about as a complete taking-responsibility-for the well-being of a society and the fulfilling of individual lives. It’s a civicospiritual vocation combining nature, science, law, music, education, medicine, memory, astrology, cosmology, and so on. Just as the Shinto temple at Ise must be disassembled and rebuilt every 20 years so that the knowledge of how to build it continues to be transmitted from one generation to the next, so the poem needs to be written over and over in ways that renew the relevance of the poet’s role.

At the outset, also from the traditional perspective, I’d like to point out that healing is most effective when practiced as that which we all constantly do for each other—and, as with all medicines, the best time to be treated by poetry is when you’re feeling just fine.

Prosody asks: are we in fact constantly tending to each other as we speak—through the tones of our voices, the pause called ‘listening,’ and the cadences of our caring?

Defining prosody is a never-ending process for me. Usually I don’t define it. Prosody simply envelops and originates me. At the same time, I recognize that prosody is an uncommon term and some degree of defining is needed in order to effectively bring this word into the conversation.

Of course, prosody consists of the elements of composition familiar to poets—stress, pause, intonation, cadence, and so forth. More primarily, indeed primordially, prosody is how language communicates other than semantically—aside from, beneath, and beyond the literal meaning of the words. It is especially this property of language that allows poetry to affect health.

Were we to recognize what words are, words in themselves would be healing. Or is it the recognition that is healing? How does photonic prosody work?

LANGUAGE ITSELF

When words mean only what they say, we die. We've opened no further possibilities if they can do no more than say what they say.

The way in which language states what it does not actually say is called 'prosody.' That which words say without actually saying it—and because they have not actually done so—is prosodic. In Sanskrit this capacity is named *dhvani*. Dhvani, the central element in Indic aesthetics and poetics, can be loosely translated as 'suggestion' or 'evocation'—either by means of the sonic properties of language or by dint of connotation. Either way, prosody—as the way in which language states more than or other than its literal meaning—is extra-lexical. A word's ability to communicate what it does not actually say is part of the word. In fact, it can be questioned whether the ineffable beyond words could even exist without the words that suggest it. This excess reference—of words communicating more than they say—can be carried to infinity. How do we understand infinity? Can we understand infinity? How could we possibly understand infinity? Even our way of not understanding infinity may be a gift from language. This 'trope' is what we are—the manifest word interchanging with the unmanifest is our sense of infinity. This play is gloriously complementary and sufficient.

When words say the unsayable they bridge the unbridgeable and remove us from isolation. Words working at this level of resolve dissolve dichotomy. Of the 84,000 afflictions (Sanskrit *kleshas*) the most dissonant is *avidya* (ignorance of connection; perception of separation). As the affective and evocative capacity of language, prosody can end ignorance. Under the same capacity, words can of course be maximally afflictive. Though language may have a mind of its own—and though this mind may be free from suffering—it is anything but user-indifferent.

According to Heraclitus, most people are deluded about the nature of language and self-expression:

Although the Logos is common, most people live as though they have their own private understandings.²

Heidegger heroically attempted to rescue logos from its history of assertiveness, coercion and lording-over-matter. He traced the verb *legein* to its meaning as 'listening' and 'laying.' With his use of language he intended to heal language itself. He diverted the meaning of logos from its primary definition as 'speech' and 'expression' to its primordial definition as that-which-underlies-and-nourishes-all-of-life. He lengthened *legein* to arrive at "Saying is a letting-lie-together before that which gathers and is gathered."³

How can this language—English—which has been so consistently mercenary, merciless, duplicitous, exploitative and overridingly commercial be used for healing? This is a problem only prosody can effectively pursue.

Were we fish, language would not only be the water we swim in, it would also be that of which the water is made, as well as the forces responsible for our form as fish.

Furthermore, we're moved by speech. Each cell assembly, whether tissue, organ, or marrow, generates an electro-magnetic field. Words as thought or phonic patterns pattern the intricately intermeshing bio-fields. If, as we speak, we become quiet enough, these patternings begin to be perceived. The hypothalamus—the neuroendocrinological signaling center—as it sits atop the speech apparatus, is especially susceptible to consonant collision and vocalic wavelet. Speaking is like using a vibratory keyboard. Similarly, on a more subtle level, thought tones our biochemical being. Chants are bioregulatory templates.

Accuracy of pronunciation is lack of separation from the initial impulse to speak. How do you come up with that which you say? Is speech any different from hearing the words we speak as we speak? It's all happening so fast—in a flash—how are we to distinguish impulse from interpretation? It's inconceivable that words would not be bioregulatory—just look where they 'are.'

PHONEME

Photonic prosody is necessarily active at the sublexical level as well. It's by way of the phonemes that language regulates and originates our beings. Phonemes are the smallest, contrastive sound units with which we distinguish meaning in language. Phonemes are tones and sonic patterns that precede us. Just as the ear formed according to the sounds it would hear, our entire bodies formed around these few sounds we're capable of meaningfully producing. We're coeval with our speech sounds. Each is a specific awareness and energy constitutive of matter. This science of sub-syllabic sound is intricate and vast. Its coherence, properties, and applications easily exceed the superficial structuring of syntax and has little or nothing in common with the nonsense of most Western sound poetry. Here I only have time to allude to this resonant world—the meeting of phonology, cymatics, shabda science, bioacoustics and prosody.

METER

Having determined meter to be the procrustean bed, one typical reaction is to sleep on the floor; another tendency is to sleep no more for fear of having one's feet chopped off or one's forehead gruesomely elongated. The prosodic equivalent of pattern perceived as procrustean bed would be tantamount to rejecting music itself, having heard a song too constrained to give rise to actual emotion. Unappealing or out-of-date patterning prompts an inelastic ear to throw out pattern altogether. Conversely, Emily Dickinson, warring against epic and patriarchy, interfaced hymn stanza with reigning iamb.

ONTOLOGY OF METER

Since, Nisāda, you killed one of this pair of krauñcas, distracted at the height of passion, you shall not live for very long.⁴

— Vālmiki

Gayatri is both a meter and a Goddess. As a meter, gayatri consists of three lines of eight syllables each. As Goddess, Gayatri is the mother of all Vedas and the unchanging reality behind all phenomena. It is never one or the other, nor one over the other.

The first classical (i.e., post-Vedic) Hindu poet was Vālmīki. When the male of two mating cranes (krauñcas) was shot from the sky with an arrow, Vālmīki extemporaneously cursed the hunter. His speech was verse—four eight-syllable lines which came to be known as the *anustubh* meter, the primary epic verse form of Sanskrit. Because Valkimi initially uttered this verse in sorrow (*shoka*), *sloka* (the name of the type of verse in which anustubh appears) is synonymous with anustubh.

Coleridge felt the influence of meters “As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine, during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed.”⁵

(True, the beat in accentual poetry tends to be slightly faster than normal heart rate, physically exhilarating the reader.)

On, off; long, short; stop, go—binary is beyond basic. In fact, the first known description of a binary system was the *Chandas Shastra* written by Panini’s younger brother Pingala, in which he listed all the Vedic meters with short and long syllables.

Studies show that the slowed, quantified pace of dactylic hexameter produces cardiorespiratory synchronization. Has any poet put together a poetry capable of embodying and guiding a prosody that has assimilated today’s knowledge of breath, biochemistry and electrons? Would it be counter-prosodic to carry out such a claim?

Appreciation of meter is not due to pattern perceived in an exterior object, but arises through our own bio-regulation and patterning owed to that ‘thing.’

Medieval meter is a simulacrum of the delight taken in the principle of order and recurrence in overcoming the terror of chaos. Existence, nonexistence; existence, nonexistence; word, space; word, space; return.

Of course meter has always survived by means of its variation from perceived pattern—both observing and breaking decorum. Shakespeare’s nobles speak in blank verse while bumpkins blurt out their words in prose and clowns sing songs. The heroic couplet dominated the entire 18th century. Can that be called ‘decorum’? Isn’t it a contradiction to create decorum? To this day rhythm still matches social status and ethos. We’re scarcely able to detect free verse or spoken on-beat rhyme as the decorum of our day.

It's not difficult to trace why western poetry, when experienced as regulatory and healing, is said to be cathartic. Even the logician Aristotle believed that meter was determined by nature (as when speech was introduced in tragedy, the meter appropriately changed from trochaic to iambic). In his essay "The Poet," Emerson wrote:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem, a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.⁶

D.H. Lawrence:

I have always tried to get an emotion out in its own course, without altering it. It needs the finest instinct imaginable, much finer than the skill of the craftsman [. . .] remember skilled verse is dead in fifty years.⁷

Emily Dickinson, associating through-composed iambic pentameter with confinement and authority, chose to write in stanzas. She didn't break from the history of metric convention but interacted with it, as did Whitman. Though Whitman professed that the soul was too whole and pure for mechanical assistance and measure, and although he (in his essay "Real Grammar") claimed the English language is "grandly lawless like the race who uses it [. . .] breaks out of the little laws to enter truly the higher ones,"⁸ he tended to draw on the dactyl to carry emotions of commonality, and the iamb to drive home individuality. Alice Notley refers to metrical patterning as a ghost behind most contemporary American poetry:

We poets know we probably shouldn't locate it and fix on it rather than on the changes American speech has brought to bear on it. But I like having it there in the poem's rich subconscious.⁹

Outburst produces corresponding pattern. Free verse often reverts unwittingly to metrics.

On the other hand, there is the certitude of author and musician Russill Paul, for whom harmony is the goal of the universe. He believes the liberties taken by artists over the last century have produced extreme discord. Paul once asked the Dalai Lama if he had any advice for artists. His Holiness' response was: "Learn to deal with your inner issues in private. Don't burden society with them; it is burdened enough. Transform your own energy first, then use your gifts to bring healing to society."¹⁰ Or, as Cornel West would perhaps say: "Too self-made."

So, evidently, not only is catharsis not in a privileged position in relation to poetic healing, it may be detrimental. What we don't currently have in American poetry is an extensive science of prosody, freed from the accusatory dichotomy of instinct and intellect. Without such knowledge, it's more likely that freed verse, like catharsis, will only add to the overall burden brought on by mass egocentrism.

PERFORMANCE

...my tongue
is my rosary.¹¹
—Kabir

Speech is performance—performance of the most fundamental act of human being. Poetry readings and theater productions are more conspicuous instances of performance. 'Performance' comes from *parfournir*—to fulfill through form. In order to speak or act, performers must surpass their limits and become a greater possibility than 'oneself.' They turn into who they are not. It's a necessary departure for the opening of human being to healing. As poet Stacy Doris has succinctly said: "becoming someone else is how we heal."¹²

Though content may be transformative in itself, performance brings the power of language to fruition—just as offering themselves in performance completes the lives of the performers.

When we hear in our speech the immediacy of the source both language and human being arise from, we're in a harmonizing waveform capable of regulating the body.

Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock has stated that shamans who encourage their clients to publicly perform their dreams are 80% effective in healing while psychiatrists encouraging their clients to describe or draw their dreams in private are only 30% effective.¹³ This goes beyond the catharsis method, calling for contexts and forms in which psyche transforms upon presentation.

CODA

I've only had time to touch upon a few of prosody's basic elements. A fully developed artscience of prosody (capable of healing) would expand upon the

properties and potencies of these elements, while bringing in the remaining elements such as pause, stress, gesture, cadence, enjambment, intonation, rhythm, and so on. And because all meanings of language other than lexical meaning can be considered prosodic, the very brackets enclosing this set of elements must be blown away.

METER IS NOT WHAT IT IS IF DEFINED OUTSIDE OF WHAT IT DOES

To protect you. That you remember you are protected.
That you are protected when this (that which protects you)
exposes you to the fire, the infinite dark.
To keep the words from harming you I write
to keep them from falling outside a form of protection.
The form that keeps them from turning on you.
The limits only form knows. New science—
to keep the limits kept and surpassed without depending on harm.

If you want to blossom, make an offering to meter for it is meter that blooms. Meter makes itself synonymous with satisfied desire. Desire produced by meter introduces speech. If you want possessions, make an offering to meter as possessions are meters and the meters will produce possessions. If you want a city, a city exists in its meter and only by its meter may you own or operate a city. Meter may be offered to the sick as prolonged sickness does not agree with meter—it disorders the settling into sickness of those whose sickness would drag on. Meter may be offered to those to whom meter does not apply as meter is the inapplicability, and the offering may then be that which makes the meter apply. Meters must be offered to those who have made offerings, as meters already offered wear out and unworn meters must be newly won to let the offering apply to those to whom it does and does not apply. Measures must be taken for those to whom well-being doesn't apply—taken to let measures that don't apply to those for whom blooming doesn't apply. Who wants to be radiant may make an offering to meaning as measure is radiance and only by measures taken can radiance apply, as meter is made of milk and as milk radiance may fully be made to apply by placing us in the midst of radiance. Offering calls to all meanings at once though we take one measure at a time and then two at once and then one again, as all measures taken at once would burn up the call and all offerings would then produce not its wellspring but its sicknesses and necroses of repeated beat.

I am with Yaska: place life at risk to be protected from now on.
 The safest way to protect yourself is by saving your gods from fault.
 Pindar was the last poet to have practiced this code—(aware of
 the impact on society once anyone finds fault outside oneself.)
 Meters are no more numbers than law is in letters.
 Words accommodate what the words want for us.
 Meter creates the structure that exceeds our technology.
 Without this support our burdens can't be carried off.
 When words delight in them is taken, once they carry burdens
 and only then are the words themselves disencumbered.
 Meter is vegetation. When I say speech is in the air
 I mean we're granted certain means and these means are our home.
 This is poetry for there is no poetry in poetry.
 Poetry is that by which all that which poetry sees is shown.

Notes

- 1) Herbert Fröhlich, "Coherent Electrical Vibrations in Biological Systems and the Cancer Problem," *IEEE Transactions on Microwave Theory and Techniques*, Volume 26, Issue 8 (1978): 613-17.
- 2) G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) 188.
- 3) Walter A. Brogan, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Twofoldness of Being* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) 97.
- 4) Vālmīki, *The Rāmāyāna of Vālmīki, Volume I: Bālakānda*, trans. Robert P. Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 127.
- 5) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834) 213.
- 6) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 290.
- 7) D.H. Lawrence, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 61.
- 8) Walt Whitman, *An American Primer* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1904) 6.
- 9) Alice Notley, *Coming After* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 136.
- 10) Russill Paul, *The Yoga of Sound* (Novato: New World Library, 2004) 130.
- 11) Kabir, *Songs of Kabir from the Adi Granth*, trans. Nirmal Dass (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 257.
- 12) Stacy Doris, in conversation.
- 13) Barbara Tedlock, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (New York: Bantam, 2005) 16.