A JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM

THE VOICE THAT CALLS, THE VOICE THAT ANSWERS (AND THE PARENTHESIS IN BETWEEN)

Author: Edward González

Source: *English Studies in Latin America*, No. 24 (January 2023)

ISSN: 0719-9139

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.

English Studies in Latin America
ISSN: 0719-9139
Issue 24 (January 2023)

The Voice That Calls, The Voice That Answers (and The Parenthesis in Between)

Edward González[1]

1 (1983) Cuban-American, English/Spanish bilingual. Studied exercise physiology and linguistics. Promotes the idea of "poesiar" (poetizing), or writing as an exercise open to whoever wants to create (alluding to the Greek idea of poet as "maker"). To him "poesiar" means exploring the interactive nexus between the individual, their body, and their environment. His first book of poetry *Sin Zapatos / Shoes Off* (Mago Editores, 2018) poetizes partly in English & Spanish. Recent works include the co-edited *Antología Poética Letras UC*, and the co-translated *Cuando la fruta madura cae: antología ecopoética D.H. Lawrence*. Currently works as a professor in the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Santiago, Chile, Facultad de Letras.

In 2005, in some rundown part of Downtown Miami there was a place called The Wallflower Gallery. Run by a man known only as C.D. Flash, this little hole-in-the-wall cultural center showcased visual and performing arts from mostly local South Florida artists. It was cramped, offered poor lighting, no snacks, no frills of any kind, really—but it had a stage. Local bands and singer-songwriters would put on small-scale shows on that stage to a room of 25 people at most, for a five-dollar entry fee. These were the kind of word-of-mouth gigs you learned about at university, where you either knew the people playing or knew someone who did. It so happened that two Fridays a month that stage and its mic were open to the public—any band, singer, pundit, ranter, or poet could take the stage for 5 minutes and do their thing, no charge. There was something cozy about the small set up: old wooden floor, wooden tables and chairs, visible interior of walls, a stage in all its senses: as a noun it was a place to perform and as a verb it was how these performances were shown. So back in 2005 I took that stage for the first time—and read poetry for five minutes. I say "read" and not "performed" because, as I hope to express in this paper, perform(ance) goes far beyond, and may not even include, reading. In the case of music, we understand explicitly that lyrics are not songs and sheet music is but an intermediary between the composer's conception of the piece and its being played for interested ears. We do not have such a clear consensus about what a poem is and what kind of role performing that poem plays. I hope in this paper to encourage anyone interested in poetry to consider a poem the way one considers music: ultimately itself in performance.

So what does it mean to perform a poem? And what then can we say is performance poetry? In a recent interview in the podcast *Poetas Ruculistas*, the Uruguayan poet, essayist and performer Luis Bravo discusses his way of seeing performance poetry, stating that he conceives of performance as the third component of a three-part process he terms "la voz inicial, el paréntesis y la segunda voz infinita" (Javier & Pancho 03:00-15:00), where performance emerges as that second, infinite voice. He starts with the first voice, what we can call inspiration, the call (el llamado), where from some recess of our mind or corner of our environment, something compels us to speak or otherwise render some snippet of language in a way that exceeds the

need to *communicate* and could be somewhat described as the need to *express* (Javier & Pancho 03:00-15:00). This is that moment when a phrase or rhythm occupies our mental theater, be it inundating our inner ear with some string of words or metric flow or projecting some snatch of language onto our visual field. We all have that voice, many of us listen to it, and some of us venture further, into the second component of Bravo's poetic tryptic: the parenthesis. I take Bravo's concept to mean that this parenthesis encapsulates the textual rendition of that first voice, where what is *in your head* becomes what is *on the page* and what was accessible only to us becomes readable to us and others, where what was invisible and internal becomes graphic and available for scrutiny. Up to this point one might nod along and mutter 'of course, first you think it, then you write it'; what sets Bravo's view apart from this is his idea that if you stop there, you are stopping short of what a poem is meant to be. And here, to understand Bravo's vision of a poem's true destination, we contend with the second voice, the infinite voice, the voice of performance. As Bravo himself states: "Desde sus orígenes la poesía fue concebida como una puesta en voz de la palabra", where "puesta en voz" can be roughly translated as "voiced", "performed", or "recited" (Bravo). Bravo's three components invite us to view a poetic work as essentially an ongoing process with a definable, if mysterious, start, a graphic/textual middle, and an open-ended third act never to be concluded. The following analysis will contend with Bravo's view and its implications for performing poetry.

The poet's intent revisited

The first point worth exploring is how seeing poetry as a three-part, open-ended process affects the poet's intent in composing and producing a poem. A perhaps familiar (yet false) dichotomy is that of the 'page' vs. the 'stage' poet. I posit that the former focuses on drafting a poetic text that conforms with whatever notions the poet had at the outset or, conversely, discovered in the process of a writing a poem: how the words fit together, metrical and rhythmic considerations, length, layout, even perhaps how a prospective reader might scan the text and how to help them scan it in some accordance with the poet's intent—everything centered on the page, the text, the graphic representation of the poem; the latter, then, aims to

showcase the poem within the context of a performance on some form of stage or space, *to bring the poem to life* or *give the poem a voice* by manipulating their own voice, tone, speed, volume and cadence of delivery—everything centered on the unfolding of the performed recitation. This dichotomy echoes the divide one studies in the linguistic differences between writing and orality, where each medium delivers language in its particular way with ready contrasts on how language is rendered in each, among them the differences in the resulting communicative phenomenon: writing generates a text, speech generates a string of utterances; writing imprints on a surface, speech travels and vanishes through airwaves. In either case, essentially, the poet answers the first voice of inspiration and endeavors to create a textual or oral response, believing at least implicitly that either a poem exists in print and offers the affordances granted to a text (among them an appreciation thereof in a time or place other than the moment of composition, rereading, close reading, critical analysis) or that it exists when it is recited, in real time, the text of the poem interacted with and shaped by the features mentioned above, such as cadence. As Michelle Gottschlich states in "Page vs. Stage: The 'Deep Rift' in Poetry Today",

> Generally a poem is considered "page poetry" if it gains strength from its positioning on a fixed surface, such as paper or a screen. The fixed surface allows the reader an infinite amount of time to explicate the poem, which permits the poem to be infinitely complex and rich. "Stage poetry" depends on its oral delivery. The performance denies the piece a static form, exerting it instead as a terminable experience. If the words are written down, there is a sense that the page is only a memory object and not really where the poem resides.

So why claim this is a false dichotomy? If we view a poem through the Bravo's lens, we must remove the 'vs.' in 'page vs. stage' and see both renderings as essential components of a poetic work. A text (or at least a memorized string of utterances) is needed if a performance is to take place, and a performance is needed if there is to be at least one instance of the poem being 'played' or heard out loud with at least some record of how the words could be scanned and coursed through. One cannot skip the *parenthesis* because it is the necessary working

space for the initial voice to be answered. It is only after the initial voice has been shaped into some sequence of words that any actual 'voicing' can take place, where the inner voice of the poet has become the outer voice of declamation. A poet must then be both on the page and on the stage if their poem is to be fully a poem. There may be strong pushback to this view, and at least intuitively one might be inclined to agree. Any poet born before the advent of recording has left only their texts behind and may not have intended to read their work out loud regardless. Conversely, many renowned poets (I am thinking of Neruda and E.E. Cummings, but examples abound) either read their poetry in a way that limits the rich inner experience of a reader by providing a readymade 'how this poem sounds,' (akin to seeing one's favorite characters from a novel brought to the screen in a film adaptation—so much was possible until those possibilities were realized) or read their poetry in a manner that proves unsatisfactory to the listener, potentially causing a retroactive distaste for the written version of the work. I argue that the poem never really exists fully on the page and truly exists when it is interacted with, even if that interaction is done by a silent solitary reader. This is no different from music or language itself, both really 'happening' when the music is heard or speech is uttered (or signed). In terms of music, the general audience needs no nudge to understand that lyrics and sheet music are not a song, but rather ingredients in that song's composition to be 'savored' in the performance of the song and the performer-listener interaction it yields.

In the field of language studies, contemporary linguistics has relocated language, first through programs like Generative Linguistics, which took Structuralism's idea of a disembodied system of symbols existing independent of speakers and reconceptualized it as something innately mental, and more recently through Cognitive Linguistics, where language, and cognition more generally, are essentially embodied and interactive. In simple terms, there is no language without speakers, no music without listeners and performers. What a poet must endeavor then to do is to set up the necessary conditions for that interaction to take place, and whether it is that solitary reader or a room full of listeners during a reading, the poem exists in its full form when it is recorded on some more or less permanent surface and in parallel

that record is set to sound.[1] The *voice-parenthesis-voice* tryptic then offers a poet a trajectory for their work that answers that first voice, records that answer on a surface and then tests out that answer in a voice of their own and leaves that record available for others to test out as well, be it in their internal reading voice or aloud. If we abandon the page/stage split or, more positively, merge them into a necessary fork springing from the desire to answer that inner voice, the poet then can view their aim as more than producing either the *artifact* of a text or the *event* of a performed reading and start seeing the poem as a loop from voice to text to voice, where neither the parenthesis nor the second voice are ever still or completely fixed, rather in a state of flux open to interaction. What opportunities and challenges present themselves for the poet in this light?

Performance as interaction

The second point of import to consider if we assume Bravo's view is what becomes possible for the poet in their composing of a poem. Seeing the practice of poetry-making (something I have called *poetizing*) as the need to answer some dwelling voice, leave evidence of that answer and recite that evidence as testimony of having come up with an answer presents the poet with unique perspectives and opportunities, a few of which I will outline next. The first opportunity is to see the text as a perpetual work in progress, or at least a perpetual template for future interactions. No two interpretations of a song are identical, even if performed by the same artist, and purists notwithstanding, no version is more authentic or genuinely 'the song' than any other. "Wild is the Wind" can arguably be said to find its best interpretation in Nina Simone's version, with a special place for David Bowie's version (which he professes to have been inspired by Simone), but neither are versions of the original composer or performer of that song, Dimitri Tiomkin and Johnny Mathis, respectively. It is said that Rachmaninoff, a virtuoso in his own right and privy to available recording technology to imprint his own performances of his pieces, claimed after hearing Vladimir Horowitz play

1 Or gestured. I confess having no knowledge of deaf poetry beyond instances like ASL Slam, but would assume that the underlying principle holds: you can write down or sequentially arrange photographs of the body gestures involved in the poem's language but it is only when the poet (or another interactor) exercises those gestures and "plays" the poem to an audience (even an audience of one).

his third piano concerto that it was Horowitz's now, and valued Horowitz's performance as equal or even superior to his own. The weight then falls on the poet to compose a poem that will yield the type of interactions the poet desires, or more broadly to compose a poem that will be interacted with in ways that, though potentially unforeseen, nevertheless resonate with the poet's intent to answer that first voice. The performance of the poem then can occur between poet and text or reader and text in iterative cycles: the poet performing the answer to the first voice, the reader playing out the poet's answer. This if nothing else provides a quasi-answer to the stock question poets get asked, 'when is a poem finished?', the answer under the tryptic view being 'never, because performances (interactions) with the poem are potentially endless and therefore each new interaction makes up part of the set of all interactions with the poem and in a way make up part of the poem itself.' It would be like asking when the ocean is finished. In a spatial sense the ocean has its limits imposed by land and temporally it oscillates depending on how much water is elsewhere on the planet, but both are dynamic cycles where erosion and evaporation change the parameters and make up of the ocean. The poem then is the same in that it is bound by a text and bound by the relative time it takes to be recited, but both are far from fixed and available for interaction and editing, high tide and low tide. Implications for engaging with poetry.

So we return to 2005 and a younger version of me reading a poem on a stage in front of people. I was not performing the poem because I did not consider it as part of what the poem was. I had generated a text to answer that first voice and I felt done. If I could have passed out the poem and everyone had read it silently that would have sufficed. I was stuck in the parenthesis. I did continue going to the open mics and seeing how others did it. One night I saw a poet do with his words what we would associate with actors doing with choice lines. "Pen to paper" was the only line that stuck, but it stuck in a deep, lodged way. The way the p's in 'pen' and 'paper' collided p-p-p, the way the vowels boomed between the consonants. I was scared, really. None of that was on the page and I thought I was missing something in the way I wrote my poems. 'How to write like that?' I thought. But what I was seeing was the interaction

between that text held in front of the mic and the poet reciting that text aloud, aiming to voice that parenthesis, and in that interaction answer that first voice that set the whole endeavor in motion. We spoke after the open mic and I handed him a short poem I had brought along. Within seconds he was at it again, juking his body, making the paper juke with him. He was Horowitz making a music student's piece sound tiers above its grade. It took me years to juke with my poems in a way I felt satisfied, and I have only recently discovered Bravo's tryptic, but those open mics nudged me toward looking for the interaction between text and voice, seeing that connection as the poem rather than separating them into different outlets. Bravo calls poetry multimodal, and indeed the way we respond to the voice of inspiration is multimodal, having a structure but also a motion, a look but also a sound.

Since that time, I have hunted for little open mics wherever they pop up. In Miami I drove an hour to a nearby city (Ft. Lauderdale) to take part in poetry contests hosted at a house cafe called DADA. In New York I would wait three hours to read seven minutes at a theater in downtown Manhattan that had monthly Open Mic Thursdays. Like a comedian trying out jokes in bars, I tried to rub text and voice together. In 2011 I arrived in Santiago, Chile and could find nowhere to read, nowhere to generate a poetic interaction, the lone exception being the now defunct Phonebox Pub which had open mics for musical acts and let me take the stage for five minutes on a random night. It would be another 10 years until I found that space again, and it would be at Universidad Catolica's Faculty of Letters where I teach. There, along with a rich community of academics and students interested in poetry, we have been slowly building a space where poets can answer their inner voices and test out those responses among other enthusiasts. How this has started changing students' perspectives on what poetry is will be the final section of this paper.

Application of these principles in workshops

As part of the 2020 Creación Artistica Fund provided by the Vicerectory of Research, my colleague Pablo Saavedra and I set out to compile and edit an anthology of poetry from students and academics from the Faculty of Letters. The response was overwhelmingly positive

and surprising in just how much poetry brimmed from so many voices in the faculty, student and docent alike. In addition to publishing the anthology, we have been running regular open mic-style workshops since 2020 to date. In these sessions we have seen particularly shy students unfold their mental answers to the voice and express themselves aloud, often for the first time in their lives. Many of them professed that they wrote in silence and rarely shared. They were essentially compiling unsent letters in response to a voice only they heard. But the workshops, many taking place online due to the Covid pandemic, have allowed students to develop a growing interest in reciting rather than reading, in 'finding their voice'. At first the interest was to be heard, to put the poem 'out there.' But as the months have passed, a new, more personal interest has also developed among some of the most frequent participants: attention to the process, to how the text looks and how it will sound, and how feedback shapes the poems the way tides shape shorelines. What I find truly fascinating and most rewarding about hosting these sessions is that participants express they now pay more attention to what makes a poem a poem, and how that poem manifests itself in various ways, and not just their poems but others' as well, present and past. Nothing is ever just on the page (or the screen) anymore. It is there waiting, the way a parenthesis signals waiting, for the second voice to interact with. Similar to how translators say they appreciate both source and target languages more when they are moving ideas between them, so can the poets attending these sessions say that they listen more to the inner voice. They care more about what fits within the parenthesis and they work on that second voice, letting all three parts of the tryptic interact with each other, the poet interacting with the text and their own voice and the listener interacting with the responses that emerge. We find analogous ideas expressed by Charles Bernstein (as cited by Pfeiler 2003):

> [live] poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange with an audience of peers, where the poet is not performing to invisible readers or listeners but actively exchanging work with other performers and participants. (Bernstein 23)

Pfeiler herself explores the notion of performance poetry, tracing its origins back to pre-literature points in human history and outlining its functions:

> relevant aspects of what is understood as oral art, or *wordpower*, preceded our concept of literature by thousands of years. Since writing was invented to represent human speech,and since the artful use of human speech has always played an important role in communal settings, one cannot disregard the fact that –even today– one finds a strong link between oral art and what we understand as literature. An analysis of primary oral poems (i.e. originally untouched by the technique of writing) by American Indian poets and secondary oral poems (i.e. written for an oral performance) by contemporary indigenous poets, revealed the following: mentally stored and written poems performed orally in a communal and social context contain not only ritualistic, performative speech acts, but also bear many other similarities on a formal level (e.g. repetition, anaphers, a strong rhythmic quality, additive structures, vocal exploitation of sounds in terms of tone and pitch etc.) (151)

Taken together, Bernstein's and Pfeiler's views frame what the workshop participants are experiencing: closer attention to how the poem is realized as a phonic event as well as an increased awareness of who will be witnessing this event and how their feedback could potentially shape future iterations.

This paper has aimed to situate performance as part of what constitutes a poem, forming the third aspect of Luis Bravo's notion of a poetic process as having three parts. This view shifts away from dichotomies of whether a poet is a stage poet or a page poet, and in part answers the question of when a poem is finished. In a sense, Bravo's view combines the page and the stage and prompts the poet to think of this combination as an open-ended process never fully finished because a poem can always be recited again, performed again, and each performance or voicing of the text adds to the overall aim of composing a poem: answering that initial inner voice. The text itself is set within a metaphorical parenthesis, subject to revision and reworking, being fed both by the inner initial voice and the voice of the poet in response. This interplay creates a necessary interaction that is essentially what performance is, and avails that potential interaction to anyone willing to engage with a poem.

Works Cited

Bravo, L. "La 'puesta en voz' de la poesía, antiguo arte multimedia*". *Revista [sic]*, no. 1, 2011: pp 6–22. Retrieved from http://w270336.ferozo.com/ojs/index.php/sic/article/view/360

Gottschlich, Michelle. "Page vs. Stage: The 'Deep Rift' in Poetry Today". *Limestone Post Magazine*. Dec. 2016, https://limestonepostmagazine.com/page-vs-stage-deep-rift-poetry-today/#:~:text=Page%20poets%20read%20most%20often,mics%2C%20and%20assorted%20public%20events.

Javier & Pancho. "El destino de la poesía es la voz." Poetas Ruculistas. Episode #49. Anchor. April 1st, 2022. https://palabradepoeta.com/el-destino-de-la-poesia-es-la-voz/ Pfeiler, Martina. *Sounds of Poetry Contemporary American Performance Poets*. Narr, 2003.