

## The troubles with “Speech”

### Section 1

“Speech” is a generic title which I apply to a wide range of writings, nearly all of them multi-voice, including **Water lines** (Chalk Editions, 2009).

There are some examples at the end of this essay.

There are pieces which I sometimes put under the title and sometimes don't; but for the purposes of these notes that does not matter.

For my purposes here the heading refers to the writings that Tina Bass and I have sought to perform over the last three years or so. More recently, others have joined in so that we can handle three voice work as well as two voice.

(For nearly three years, I have been formally researching intermedia notation at Goldsmiths, University of London; but work with Tina predates that study and will continue after it.)

Mostly, the poems employ a simple script format, with a character name (perhaps “Voice 1”) in one column and the text to be performed in another. Occasionally, there are directions. Some, however, just use columns, with or without directions, but no character names.

And that was my start. From my point of view when I began work on what I now sometimes refer to as an early part of “Speech”, about thirty years ago, early 1980s, breaking down the utterance into speech attributable to individuals was something of an abstraction.

This aesthetic (and operational) attitude arises, I believe, from my involvement in *jjggjj* (1976 – 1978); and in later groupings and solo works that utilised improvisation and extemporisation (including call and response) and time delay via recording / playback devices: one might plan utterance or find it arising from the performance, but it was not much to do with the proposition of individual psyches and not attributed to any one person in the performance.

(I felt a strong sense of recognition when, this century, I read the 1979 novel **Jem** by Frederik Pohl, in which creatures of the air on a distant planet communicate as something like a chorus, all saying much the same thing -- “We must fly higher” -- and debating

what they are doing by subtle changes in the repetition, much as a flock of birds negotiates its direction of flight by gesture. This last metaphor is my own metaphor and not the novelist's.

In some ways, I have never quite left such ideas behind.

I do not offer it as an over-arching approach. I am, for instance, at this time, writing poems in the proposed voice of "Saint Elidius", poems in which what the voice of the poem says tells us something of the character of the speaker – fairly conventional stuff. It is, however, an approach; and a realistic one given the degree to which we speak in clichéd and boilerplate language.

Recently, I was listening on a train to a father speaking to his child. Pointing out of the window, he said "That is the park we are going to." It was a big common and the train was going slowly; so that we were going past it for some time.

A little while later, the child pointed out of the window and said "Daddy, daddy, that's where we are going today."

It's an anecdote; but it struck me as being quite illuminating regarding how and why we acquire language.

Obviously, we need language in order to be able to say "Be careful of that brick wall which is beginning to topple over towards you" or "I'm hungry" or "How about going to bed together" and so on.

But a lot of our prattle is other than that. It's almost entirely stylised, and sometimes verging on content free; and is often call and response.

The child in my story was saying something that was quite true; but, in terms of passing information, it was completely pointless. She was telling him back what he had told her. She was learning to use language socially, the process by which we tell each other what we all know is already held to be true.

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What I have learned in my experiments with Tina has reinforced what is something of a hobby horse of mine: that typescript is a very poor notational system.

However, adding directives to the typescript to any effective extent quickly makes it nearly unreadable. So it becomes ineffective.

Tina and I have greatly improved the readability of my scripts by discussing them shortly before we perform. It is much easier, or perhaps it is much quicker, to retain notational information in the

memory, having deduced its necessity from the typescript, than to have it on the sheet of paper one is reading. That sheet of paper is most useful, in performance, when it is used as a prompt rather than some kind of Jacquard punched tape.

In our discussions, we have improved the typescripts that I supply by adding marks by pen. Significantly, I feel, the marks that we add are idiosyncratic; we each write what best communicates to us what it is we want to remember under stress.

That may be to do with either how we each use and understand marks on paper or how we conceptualise the performance ideas or both.

It might have been thought that typescript is a straight-forward substitute for the underlying language and layout, or the notional underlying language and layout (where the text has gone directly into the keyboard without being written out fully beforehand). Indeed, it might be argued that typescript is superior because it is often more visually readable than an individual's hand-writing.

Certainly, Tina and I have always started from typescript.

Yet from the point of view of someone used to interpreting graphics as indicative scores, hand-writing can be seen as a useful encoding system. (A lot of my early performance scripts were hand-written.) That it is often something of an idiolect is beside that point.

So one might propose making one's own score by hand as a performer, constructing it from a discussion of shared typescript.

Actors would not need a score. They'd remember what they would do; and Chris Goode has said that the teams he works in do not produce final production scripts.<sup>1</sup> They know what they are going to do and they cope well with variations arising from misremembering.

I do distinguish between poets performing poetry and actors performing it; and I am usually less than well-pleased with what actors do; but Goode -- actor, poet and musician -- shows that the two, poetry method and drama method, do inform each other and can co-exist.

Another "problem" is the brevity of most of the "Speech" texts. They are over soon after they have begun.

My work with Tina, therefore, is a great deal of effort for something that is so brief.

From my point of view, that is ok. The effort is its own reward; and I am inclined to think that Tina Bass would agree with that even if the rewards we each gain are slightly different.

I wonder, though, how the audience feels about it.

Here we hit a problem of data collection. It is difficult to frame a question in such a way that one collects useful information because one's response to such a performance is not instantaneous but evolves over a period of time. Furthermore, the act of questioning intervenes in and distorts the process.

My impression based on unwitting testimony, probably as reliable at least as the result of direct questioning, is that the audience has been underwhelmed.

I think that is the speed with which the event is passed compared to the complexity of the event: it's just too quick and detailed for the audience to absorb and interpret what they have heard and seen.

In narrative terms, the "speech" poems are disappointing. They are syntactically and semantically discontinuous and must be awkward to understand for those who are not used to such writing.

Some years ago, someone said on a list where I was posting such writing that it was "just Pinter" which was suggestive of a misreading of Pinter as well; and it may be unfair and misleading to quote it. But it raises the question of how people do receive and interpret writing.

A few days ago, a highly intelligent friend told me, unprompted, that the poem they most remembered from my book **Snap shots** was the one where, at a London terminal, people fell down an escalator. There is no such poem in that book. There is a poem in which people get caught up in ticket gates with cumbersome luggage.

He also said that much of the book went over his head (his exact phrase).

That did give me pause for thought. I had thought that all the poems in the book are straightforward and easy to understand. They were collected for readings where the audience is unused to "linguistically innovative poetry".

I suspect that many of the problems would vanish for him if he heard them performed. I write to be heard. Also, I suspect that the

difficulty he experienced is largely a response to writing in a style or format he was not prepared for in his conception of poetry.

In the context of these responses, my writing of “Speech” looks a little ambitious.

The audience for a book like **Water lines** is largely self-selecting; and, being a web-based electronic book, that audience has been potentially huge. While I have a long way to go before I actually do have a huge audience, I have every reason to think that already I have reached hundreds of people with whom I have had no previous contact.

Only one person had committed their response to the website when I last checked. Many more have emailed or spoken their responses to me; and all amount to one overall statement: that they found the book rewards close reading; while a brief reading conveyed very little.

All of which suggests to me that “Speech” consists of quite a satisfactory set of thought experiments! In that context, the extended activity of myself and Tina Bass and the repeated attention of our audiences over the years can be placed under the heading of “thought”. Some poetry may follow!

I have no desire to make a case for poetainment. There’s far too much of that in the world already. Nevertheless, I concede that performances of these dense and complex texts may deliver few returns in terms of immediate enjoyment!

It might be that the best approach for any future work with them is to make recordings so that one can return again and again to the performance.

The experimentation itself is its own reward for the writer and, hopefully, all the experimenters.

In terms of expanding the experimentation itself, I am inclined to think that hand-written scores will deliver good results, as I argued above. The problem there is one of time. Tina and I have developed a manageable approach to the task of working with typescript. We may not have the time to make it more burdensome.

*Scilly*

*January 2011*

## **Section 2: Afterword**

I sent a copy of what has become Part 1 of this writing to Tina Bass, in draft but substantially as it is here, asking if she objected in any way to anything I had written about her and her involvement in the “Speech” project.

She replied: “There is nothing here that I object to. I should add that I also agree with all that you are saying.”

My thanks to her.

Some hours after reading that message from Tina, at sunset, I sat watching Mounts Bay in West Cornwall, observing the colour and depths-of-field drop out of the scene.

It occurred to me that there may be a parallel between use of colour in “graphic poems” and multivoice in “linear semantic poems”.

One must beware of the unreliability of terminology as imprecise as this. On the other hand, forcing an appearance or claim of precision upon such terminology would solve nothing.

Just as I have found myself, and many others, to be working in intermedia, so too I am working inter-genre. I suspect that if I go back through my notes and essays, I would find occasions when my “intermedium” had better been “inter-genre”.

If that is the situation in which one writes, then almost every writing event is going to be something like a moment in a ford-crossing where one is standing in two places, at least, at the same time. One needs a Muybridge to take a photograph of the writer with both feet in the air while various readers think of the same writer being variously-based in terms of genre.

If “voice” is not an indicator in a change of personnel as such, multivoice may not actually make the poem more complex, or not more complex than it needs to be. Trying to interpret may lead us to seeing it as it as being more complicated than it is, however.

I suppose, in terms of individual designations, I am looking to indicate a *dramatis personae* without main characters – a crowd scene where all we are given are the words a crowd shouts; and it is down to direction and / or rehearsal to allocate those words – because, clearly, we shouldn’t have everyone saying everything. Realistically, that is not how crowds work unless they are turning

into political rallies; and, artistically, one wishes to be able to discern the separation of an event's elements.

In more closely scripted sections of "Speech", there may be some designation, equivalent to *first mechanical* , *second mechanical* and so on.

The dynamics of such crowds are rather interesting and may be more representative of human interaction than we allow.

The number of "main characters" in actual human discourse who are actually leading is rather small. A few lead; but most powerful people are rather opportunistic.

We see many movers and shakers perhaps because we interpret; whereas what our eyes have observed, before the brain gets to work, is not much more than Brownian movement – an excellent phenomenon to be sure, but not one exhibiting consciousness and certainly not personality.

I heard a "joke" recently – I believe it was intended humorously – to the effect that Impressionist painting make for difficult jigsaws because there are no hard outlines to things.

So it often is with apparent personality.

Colour allows a further and different distinction between elements of a composition – if we deny the equivalence between a colour image and the greyscale. It does not follow, however, that I can meaningfully label those elements. But I am content to work with a multiplicity of unknowns.

Last time I expressed such an approach to an unbeliever – an unbeliever in what I say i.e. a believer – I was accused of being a nihilist.

It's not quite like that.

For instance, there is a widespread proposition that someone who says they do not know if there is God is an agnostic + one is either a believer, an agnostic or an atheist. That is, we are being subjected to a determination to box things in known categories.

But there is another proposition, hardly mine, but one that I have adhered to for some time.

That proposition is that the question “Is there a God?” is almost certainly so ill-conceived as to be invalid; as invalid, for instance, as the question “May all the gods be appeased?” One cannot answer positively or negatively.

In poetry, my concern isn’t just the anecdotal boredom of poems using “I” as a pointer to the poet who wrote them; but that any such statement is going to be such a simplification as to be not much use.

I overstate my case. But...

I could say that it’s ok to write in the third person using “I” i.e. proposing a character who does believe in themselves as an entity.

It wouldn’t fit with what I have said unless one were taking into account, compositionally, a delusion.

Yet I do write like that. (My series **Elidius on Ennor** <sup>2</sup>, for instance; and **Next door** tend to assume discrete personalities.)

I collaborate with individuals.

I have friends and intimates.

I try to look after my own interests.

There is a character, Frost, in a C S Lewis novel, **That hideous strength**, who dies in agony denying as illusion the reality of his suffering. I would dispute with Lewis almost every belief underlying his story; but I am aware of that kind of thinking and Lewis analyses it well. For instance: “Motives are not the causes of action but its by-products.”

One may suffer delusions, but one may also be deluded that one is deluded.

If I were not strongly aware that our personalities are fluid, and our interactions with others similarly fluid, I would most probably not be writing “Speech”.

I doubt that I have really added much in this afterword, beyond maybe saying the same thing from different points of view – and that offers some hope of surveyors call triangulation.

Regarding the use of colour in *visual poetry* and *graphic scores*, I have little hope of finding or asserting a code; but that does not



mean that colour is not interpretable. Indeed, I have experimental evidence from recent workshops with the viola player Benedict Taylor that colour can be interpreted. It's a little like becoming used to hearing another's language and finding that one has acquired some of the vocabulary without having consciously learned that language.

I would have said that I do not speak French; but in France recently I found myself responding, somewhat haltingly, in French, when I did not think about it. Changes in colour in what I am reading have something of that effect upon me.

Further study of what others have done in that regard might be useful; but it may be just as valuable to see if it is possible to observe more objectively than before the responses of myself and my collaborators when we are reading polychrome scores.

Having said that, I am, in some ways, not at all sure that I know anything more about that reading process than I did three years ago.

I had been exchanging emails on related matters with a colleague at a fairly rapid and productive rate until I asked "but what is it we do when we read a graphic poem into utterance?"; and, since then, I have heard nothing.

That could mean a number of things; but I have noticed that this question is a very good way of bringing a discussion to an embarrassed halt.

*Penzance, Cornwall*

*January 2011*

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The desire to testify -- Interview with Chris Goode -- December 2008 – February 2010 by Lawrence Upton  
<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2010/02/desire-to-testify.html>

<sup>2</sup> These two series are not yet published

## Example 1

*[[1 voice at a time, unrushed; pause between couplets]]*

witnesses are dying  
serving the alcohol

nothing else for days  
in small voices

shrugging their shoulders  
for quick moments

dull sorts of things  
the disgrace going

filling empty space  
looking forward

bad-tempered and impatient  
they could have killed

and nothing to forgive  
a common practice

an urge to continue  
to get out of things

stammering speech  
talking of cheerful time

transferring affection  
large stumbling gesticulation

in great tiredness

each time with shock

stealthily understood  
few words of blessing

being off-hand  
crying and everything

## Example 2

*[1 voice at a time, unrushed; pause between each paired triplet]*

drunk says to break out	showing reddened teeth
a system follows	a façade of love
Maddening thoughts of love	eyes closed by darkness
something is burning us	the two of them
crouching on the floor	the mind blank for hours
wriggling and winking	technology that's booming
twisted into smiles	pushing them harder
difficult moments	changing their nature
thrashing, looking confused	whole lives unsung
in a few precise words	much imprecision
what crazy ideas	no reward for sadness
somewhere far away	trembling and quivering
tissues in boxes	a familiar face
staring at people	men shouting at men
treated like humans	punched, humiliated
lying on the ground	there were doubts in mind
one could not understand	a stretch of waste land
infinite patience	some books are so old!
one waved all morning	open like a door
beautiful little pain	turning the lights off
one isn't useless	to make little pains

### Example 3

*[1 voice at a time, unrushed; slight pause between each utterance]*

**Voice 1:** Ruined walls a memento.  
**Voice 2:** Scufflings, scraps of paper.  
**Voice 1:** Circulation of miracles.  
**Voice 2:** Rolling astonishing richness.  
**Voice 1:** Crudely abandoned by death --  
**Voice 2:** Is anyone not working?  
**Voice 1:** And that unequivocal --  
**Voice 2:** Marked, but unsupervised --  
**Voice 1:** Deposited with the mysterious.  
**Voice 2:** It is difficult to imagine --  
**Voice 1:** The great beauty, moaning.  
**Voice 2:** One looks for the signs --  
**Voice 1:** And unexplained rage --  
**Voice 2:** Like turbulence in sea --  
**Voice 1:** Conversing in low whispers  
*[Pause]*  
**Voice 2:** Death would release them all --  
**Voice 1:** The mouths of each of them --  
**Voice 2:** Their bodies animated --  
**Voice 1:** And excitedly filled the air.

#### Example 4

*[1 voice at a time, unrushed; pause between each utterance except after a double dash which indicates that a speech is being interrupted by the next speech]*

**Voice 1:** Staring incomprehension --  
**Voice 2:** How to explain it!  
**Voice 1:** in unusual circumstances.  
**Voice 2:** The breeze has freshened.  
**Voice 1:** There is an ambiguity.  
**Voice 2:** Who exactly is in power?  
**Voice 1:** Slumped sulkily in an armchair.  
**Voice 2:** I assure you it is expected.  
**Voice 1:** Your voice is harsh.  
**Voice 2:** It is not specified as a precondition.  
**Voice 1:** Gifted by mysterious power?  
**Voice 2:** I am grateful to you.  
**Voice 1:** Someone awry at a filing cabinet.  
**Voice 2:** All manner of repressions.  
**Voice 1:** A bundle of carnal sounds --  
**Voice 2:** Knocking gentle at illusions --  
**Voice 1:** unable to progress.  
**Voice 2:** dark outside and raining now --  
**Voice 1:** Contemptuous as always --  
**Voice 2:** an untidy scribble of moonlight --  
**Voice 1:** wonderfully indecisive.  
**Voice 2:** You speak in the voice of a little girl.  
**Voice 1:** Go back to the theatre!  
**Voice 2:** Flickering, jolting my sensations.  
**Voice 1:** Waiting to go shopping.  
**Voice 2:** Like everyone else in the prison.

# aphorism

the

world

expected

quickly

huge

thought

found

found

because

lots

sold on

to talk

rather

to follow

# aphorism

*Voices perform simultaneously*

<b>Voice A:</b>	the	world
	expected	quickly
	huge	thought
		found
<b>Voice B:</b>		found
	because	lots
	sold on	to talk
	rather	to follow



