

SOUND WRITTEN AND SOUND BREATHING: VERSIONS OF PALPABLE POETICS

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The poem is not speech, nor in the earth, nor on paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is not.

—*Cecilia Vicuña*

PRELUDE: THE GEOGRAPHY OF WRITING

Who writes on who?

Writing begins as gestures upon the earth for Cecilia Vicuña's long poem, "Purmamarca." The poem reciprocates this initial writing—"en la tierra un rombo de tierra" (a rhombus of earth on the earth)—which begins on the thigh of the earth, next appears as a "lunar romboidal" (geometric mole) on the poet's own thigh, and only then is brought to the page and inscribed by the poet as a poem.

Similarly, in the practice of an Andean diviner, words are received from lines traced in the dust; these nonalphabetic signs are first made and then their meanings unraveled, like the poetic word that is "both a question and an answer" at once.¹ So, a question like "Who writes on who?" leads to the many questions that weave through Vicuña's poems: Where is the poem? Who writes the poem? What is the relation between alphabetic and other writings, between speech and writing, between writing and reading, between reading aloud and performing, or between myth and poetry? The poems make varying responses, sometimes provisional or barely hinting.

Vicuña writes that, as in divining, "to approach words from poetry is a form of asking questions" (UW 34). Consistently, her poems reflect an intimate concern with language, and a belief that, in poetry, words are not simply instruments under the writer's or speaker's control. Where calendars and divining may be oriented toward the past or future, "the word is the divination of what we are now and why" (UW 34). In this, her poetics resembles that of the Mazatec shaman, María Sabina, whom Vicuña quotes—"Language falls, comes from above as little luminous objects that fall from heaven, which I catch word after word with my hands" (quoted in UW 52).

She on us or us in her?

I. "TO SAY A COUPLE OF MYTHS THAT ARE PERTINENT":
MYTH, POETRY, SPEECH, AND WRITING

For the discourse of literary criticism, the spoken poem is conspicuous only in its absence. The full measure of Cecilia Vicuña's poetry cannot be taken, however, if it is considered in the conventional terms of written literature. As Eliot Weinberger suggests in the introduction to *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water*, her poems must be approached by "thinking first of their performance" (xi). The hybrid of both the conventions of Western literature and an oral tradition, these are poems of secondary orality (poetry that proceeds through writing to performance).

Literary approaches to the poem, even in the wake of Derridean textuality,² retain their immense holdings of circumscribed and carefully provenanced poetic artifacts (now called texts) that are the payoff of lingering New Critical investments. Ambitious for a more rigorous, scientific criticism, New Criticism's imagination of the poem "encouraged the illusion" that the work was autonomous and could be "adequately studied or even understood in isolation" (Eagleton 44). Its objective was "to divorce the poem from any context beyond itself and propose a critical method sufficient to understanding its full value from a study of the object" (Drucker 230). This particular method bounded the poem, created it as an interiority, an enclosed system of meaning, while simultaneously excluding all that was now exterior, including alternate versions of the text.

The New Critical conception depends upon a stable, authoritative text³ to maintain the poem's autonomy, one to which the orally composed poem must seem irreconcilable. In short, it is a poetics made to account only for the written poem. Albert Lord, one of the earliest modern scholars of oral poetry after his teacher, William Parry, seems to have subscribed to this dichotomization of orality and literacy, and to its implicitly hierarchic genealogy:

Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained. The written technique, on the other hand, is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly combine. to

form another, a third, a "transitional" technique. It is conceivable that a man might be an oral poet in his younger years and a written poet later in life, but it is not possible that he be *both* an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career. The two by their very nature are mutually exclusive. (Lord 129)

Informed by a Romantic sensibility, Lord describes an irreversible separation of oral and written poetry, so that his "oral" is uncontaminated, preliterate. His theory of oral formulae was partly designed to quantify the oral and written influences in a poem, so that, having met a threshold, a poem could be authenticated as oral. This, and the ancillary burden of arguing for the Homeric epic as the product of a single, orally composing bard, led him to the unfortunate conclusion—one that Vicuña's work challenges—that oral and written poetry "by their very nature are mutually exclusive."

Ruth Finnegan notes Lord's significant emphasis on the "lack of a fixed and 'correct' version of the text in oral literature," even while she questions his notion that the formula is a necessary and defining condition of the oral poem (Finnegan 69). Lord's formulaic theory corrects the false ideas that oral poetry is equivalent to recitation from memory, is necessarily communal, and is composed of static forms fixed by tradition. While it is tempting to naturalize the written poem as a model for poetry in general, Finnegan questions the applicability of the conceptions of written literature to oral poetry: "The model of written literature with its emphasis on *the text*, *the original* and correct version, has for long bedeviled study of *oral* literature, and led researchers into unfruitful and misleading questions in an attempt to impose a similar model on oral literature" (69). The "model of written literature" entails the "work," a unified and bounded authority whose meaning is stable across time and culture. It is the proposition that "work" exists as a singularity that allows critical editors to make decisions of recension (the prioritization of one among several variant readings) and emendation (the correction of probable errors) in their pursuit of an authoritative text.

Unfortunately, anthropology too has imposed textual models upon the oral poem, partly in order to bound it. Early ethnographers seem to have had few reservations about adapting the models' emphasis "on *the text*" and "*the original*" to the study of oral poetry. In a thoughtful narrative, Lord envisions the seemingly inevitable (and suitably tragic) collision of orality and textuality in the scene of fieldwork:

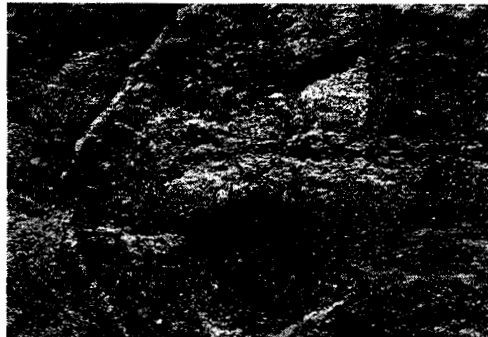
The singer who dictated it was its "author," and it reflected a single moment in the tradition. It was unique. Yet, unwittingly perhaps, a fixed text was established. Proteus was photographed, and no matter under what other forms he might appear in the future, this would become the shape that was changed; this would be the "original." Of course the singer was not affected at all . . . The tradition went on. Nor was the audience affected. They thought in his terms, in the terms of multiformity. But there was another world, of those who could read and write, of those who came to think of the written text not as the recording of a moment of the tradition but as *the song*. (124–25)

Here, the imagination of tradition is suspiciously pure, but the imposition of "original" status on the oral transcription and its constitution of "the" poem seem worth considering. Is the fable of transformation before us an expulsion from the garden, or is it an emergence from a shadowy cave? Either version renders visible the parameters of the "textual economy" within which discussion of oral poetry has been forced to operate.

While we have been discussing the powerful dichotomy of orality and literacy, another drama has been taking shape unnoticed, the contest between poetry and—what has too often been defined as its opposite—myth. Here we see New Criticism's anthropological twin, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, dealing with the nontextuality of oral poetry by calling it myth and then defining myth as a use of language that is eminently translatable, where words themselves, the "style," "original music," and "syntax," can be dismissed in the face of "the *story* which it tells." Such a conception has its practical advantages, as Lévi-Strauss notes (without acknowledging its presumptions about the subliterate status of the object of study): "The mythical value of myth is preserved through the worst translations. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world" (206). Even as it reduces "myth" to "mythical value," that which is left once language is stripped away, this doubly reductive notion of myth proposes that a sufficient condition of myth is that it be "felt as a myth." The circular logic generalizes myth and reduces the burden on the mythographer.

For Lévi-Strauss, the surplus of variants is so vexing that an erasure of the words themselves must have seemed the only way to clean up the mess. "Myth is language, functioning at an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at taking off from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling" (206). In this conception, it is the linguistic particulars (e.g., syntax) that ground meaning, denying it its proper due—flight away from language. Its transcendental epistemology suggests that de-worded *myth* holds a privileged place to which the actual individual tellings of a myth only uneasily aspire. Myths, after all, come to their collectors wrapped in the nasty particularities of language. In Lévi-Strauss's conception, a deeper formal unit, the mytheme, structures this quasi-universal unconsciousness. The mythographer then combs through the many "stories" collected, extracts these mythemes, elides textual variants and reassembles the Myth, proper noun.

Since what gets collected in books (for readers to "feel as myth") is most often oral in origin, the process of textualization often includes the comparison of several tellings or versions of a myth. A distillation follows, in the course of which the variances between the tellings, the exact phrases used, the very names of the tellers, may be dropped off as a new, generalized, and condensed Myth is produced. It is easy to see, in this parody of a mythography, how the specifics must seem unimportant, since no detail can be invested with more significance than that of the whimsical, perhaps even accidental variant of a single teller. The significant



Purmamarca,
North of Argentina,
1987. Photo: César
Paternosto.

role of oral transmission (and perhaps bad transcription) in the *writing up* of myths allows a textual scholar like Lévi-Strauss to propose their translinguistic quality, and almost necessitates the generation of the fictional "Myth" that is set above and prior to its material, variant instances.

Clearly, a myth so constituted would stray far from poetry, stripped as it is of its outer bark. The examples of particularizing transcriptions of oral poetry, which demonstrate the signifying accomplished through the vocal dimension, should have largely discredited such an antipoetic approach to myth. But it is still common to find anthropologists in important journals calling up myths in their own prosaically worded synopses, without any sense that this myth might better be considered as an authored story or poem.

The advent of "total translation" within the context of the ethnopoetics movement of the 1970s marked the first concerted attempt—the only significant movement to date—to deal with the extraneous spoken dimensions of poetry (Tedlock 1983; Rothenberg 1983).⁴ Taking a cue from Charles Olson's "projective verse," total translations aimed to produce texts particular enough to be used as scores for spoken performance. Suddenly, phrasing, intonation, and the delivery of the poem had significance (not to mention the rich parallelism, syntax, or diction). The spoken could no longer be swept under the carpet when the artistry that composed these poems was revealed. As these transcriptions moved toward providing ever more sufficient accounts of "the performance," like Lord's fictive folklorist, they posited their own "original."

Even as it acknowledges aspects of the spoken poem that linguistics had disregarded in its concern for phonetics, total translation cannot accommodate the span of the poems' potentially limitless tellings. Like Saussurean linguistics, it needs to downplay the historical, the variant, and the potential for intervention by individual speakers. Recall that for Saussure, "the sole object of study in linguistics was the normal, regular existence of a language already established" (72); total translation takes the single witnessed instance of performance as the poem, the transcription its sole object. While the neglect of the span of versions may seem a minor point, it is the key to the rethinking of a spoken poetics as interface or hybrid (and not a "transitional technique") between the oral and written.

We can say that the "spoken poem" (where nontextual variability and versioning are implicated in its very spokenness) is essentially absent from the critical discourses that might address it. This absence can be seen as one dimension of the more general repression—"dematerialization of the text" (Eagleton 49)—of languages' materialities in these discourses. Writing about visual materiality and the reading of marked typography, Johanna Drucker notes that "the surplus of information provided by the expressive manifestation of the written form cannot be fixed, as Saussure had wished to fix the values of linguistic terms, in a finite order of a closed set of elements" (245). When the delivery of the poems becomes an act of *poesis* rather than a mere recapitulation or recitation, it reveals the expressive manifestation of sound, the materiality of the spoken; it allows the audience to take the performance's variations as valuable, as enrichments of the work, not deviations from it. General recognition of this would require literary scholars, for example, to attend to poetry performance and account for the result, an enormous and unstable field of variations springing from the text—versioning poetry's method for exceeding the boundaries of closed signification.

Performed or "versioned" or sounded poetries like Cecilia Vicuña's cannot be adequately accounted for by a criticism that approaches poetry as a text to be dismantled with the New Critical tools of explication and evaluation; introducing the multiple spoken versions of the poem only compounds the task of reading if reading itself is conceived as the establishment of the poems' meanings, the rules by which they mean, and finally their adjudication. Yet if the reader even briefly accedes to the poetics proposed by the versioning poem (rather than discounting it as an excessive faith in language), the "mythic" aspect of this poetic can be understood: taking a poem seriously has to mean being ready to reconsider the world in its terms.

II. WRITTEN AND BREATHING: THE DOUBLE WORKING OF WORDS

The dewarding of myth and the dichotomizations of myth and poetry, orality, and literacy stand in contrast to Cecilia Vicuña's Andean-influenced poetics. Her

"Palabrarmás" poems move "to enter words in order to see."⁵ Vicuña explains their origin as "a vision in which individual words opened to reveal their inner associations . . ." (1992:27). For Vicuña, moving toward the material ground of words "is the point of word working: to work speech, to speak watching speech work" (*UW* 30). *Word working*, of course, is a partial translation of *Palabrarmás*, a neologism made from the Spanish *palabra* (word), *labrar* (work), *armas* (arms), and *más* (more). The playfulness concentrated in this one word reflects the poet's sense of the richness and particularity of language.

Here, a poet coming out of a (mythic) oral tradition insists that poetry can be made from the unravelling of individual words—an entering into the language, rather than a motion to get behind or above it. A single word can spin multiple variants through the careful application of ear and eye—a versioning at the level of individual words as well as whole poems. Vicuña further extends the possible definitions of *Palabrarmás*: "A word that means: to work words as one works the land; to think of what the work does is to arm yourself with the vision of words. And more: words are weapons, perhaps the only acceptable weapons" (1992:27). This multiplicitous sense of words is seen by Regina Harrison as being generally emblematic of the Quechua language. As evidence, she quotes from the lengthy definition of the Quechua word *huaca* given by Garcilaso de la Vega, the Inca-chronicler of Andean-Spanish contact:

It means something sacred . . . Likewise they call a *huaca* all the things that they had offered up to the Sun . . . Also they call any large or small temple a *huaca* . . . Also they give the same name to all those things which in beauty or excellence excel above all the others of their type . . . On the other hand, they call *huaca* all the ugly and monstrous things . . . Thus also they name anything which strays from its natural path a *huaca* . . . They call a *huaca* the large mountain chain . . . They give the same name to the large hills that stand out from the other hills . . . (Quoted and translated in Harrison 88–89)

In her small folio, *PALABRARMAS*, Vicuña herself looks into the multiple meanings of a Quechua word:

. . . the name Pachapacariq, morning star, means at
once: *amanecer de la tierra, tiempo-estrella, de la mañana*,
dawn of the earth, time-star, morning star
a name that changes from
place to place.

(*PALABRARMAS*)

Throughout Vicuña's work and thinking, the etymology becomes the occasion for poetry, crossing languages. Across time, it sometimes involves a remembering of lost or destroyed meanings—to remember or reconstruct; it is also a kind of listening, for "words want to speak" and so "to listen to them is the first task" (*UW* 36).

What do we mean by *huaca*, or "poem"? For that matter, what do we hear in the "text" or "spoken performance"? In Buffalo, New York, on March 10, 1994, Cecilia Vicuña gave a performance that was at once ordinary speech, myth, and poetry, which bridged the oral/literate dichotomy by mixing oral composition with a "conventional" reading (secondary orality) from texts in a book. Her performance seemed to insist that the spoken and written versions of the poem are inseparable.

In the course of listening to the tape of a performance, transcribing it, and comparing it with the poems in *Unravelling Words*, the use of the text as a loose score becomes apparent. Particularly in the oscillations between Spanish and English (the junctures as moments of possibility), the poems are performed outward from the text rather than being simply recitations of it. Vicuña's dramatic physical presence as a speaker and the accompaniment of music and gesture make this a clear performance.

As a substitute for the audio recording, which itself substitutes for the performance, we have the twice-removed transcript⁶ (made by this listener with the help of recollection and an audio recording of the performance):

[singing fades in]
originally I was very glad to be here
but now I'm very sad

The absent context, it should be immediately clear, can only be gestured to in a transcription. Vicuña's performance had been preceded by that of Toi Derricote, who read quite personal poems about the experience of racism, so this plausible reason for the change in Vicuña's mood would have been clear to all in the audience.

first I wanted to sing
for the snow to go away

[singing]
vaya vaya vaya vayaaa . . .
aya vaya aya vaya aya vayaaa . . .

but then its not only for the snow to go away
its also for what you've been saying

and I also wanted to say that
its good to be in front of a painting that's called an ode to joy
and yet is so dark
its all dark
terribly dark

As with the paradigmatic exterior frame of the oral poem, Vicuña begins by spatially and temporally locating the poem. Singing "vaya vaya" (go away), she situates herself in relation to what the audience has been hearing, the conditions

outside, even the decorations of the room. The performance is thus made context-specific and the audience is implicated within it.

[Cecilia stops shaking a loop of shells and hangs it around the microphone]

when we were asked to come here and speak
lets say about myth
the first thing that comes to mind is that
of course

just the name myth
is a name
being seen or being said from the outside

and
if I wanted to say just one thing about it it's that
as I perceive it

perhaps
The myth for us
is language
just plain words and

and then words

as I perceive them
they are time

simply
time

and sound

written
and sound

breathing

By noting that "Myth" is a name given from the outside, Vicuña urges her listeners to reconsider it now from their shared position, which she has just located, and to consider it as language. Myth is language, she says, plain words, and these involve time, are composed of sound—and sound itself takes a double form, being both written and breathing. In less than fifteen seconds, Vicuña has moved us from a generalization of myth to the particulars of the words the audience is hearing spoken and read to it. Where Lévi-Strauss maintains that "Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a

myth is still felt as a myth," Vicuña seems to recall the audience, now us, to the very complex composition of its language.

and there's an ancient tradition that says that
the voice is the bridge

that through the thread of voice
we cross dimensions

because the universe has been created by sound
this is a common idea in ancient india
and in the ancient andes

so we create
by sound

and the word that we use now

SOUND

sonido en español

originally

in this proto-european language

which is the mother language which we speak in English

it was swen

and swen means chant

an incantation

so even in indo-european languages sound

was incantation

Sketching a rough etymology of "sound," Vicuña relates the term to the creation of the material world. What might seem to be fluidly immaterial—vocal sound—is described with a physical metaphor, "the thread of the voice." The conventional dichotomization of language into oral and written is here refigured, unified by sound, as "sound breathing" and "sound written."

This initially strange metaphor—voice as thread—is deeply implicated in Andean culture. In a concrete poem, Vicuña writes: "la realidad es una línea." The poem consists of this one line of poetry written, seemingly with a single stroke, on both sides of a card that is folded and bound with black thread. The iconicity of the signifying thread itself recalls the Quechua language, which, while it gained an alphabet from the Spanish, had its own system of writing prior to the conquest. Putting the thread and threadlike writing of her thin black script together as one poem, Vicuña reminds us that letters are as physical as string. It is an enactment of the line she has just improvised above—suggesting the mate-

rial commonality of writing and voice; as she writes elsewhere: "The word is articulated silence and sound, organized light and shadow" (UW 40).

The reality of the line is also important in reference to the *ceq'e*, "a sight-line for observing astronomical events in relation to the horizon in the ancient Andean city of Cusco." The *ceq'e* system consisted of 328 *huacas*, one for each day of the year and grouped into 41 spokes of 8 *huacas* each. The complicated mathematics of this sight-line calendar system had multiple uses and levels of meaning, and has been compared to the *quipu* (knot in Quechua), a group of multicolored threads intricately knotted together. In the notes to an art exhibition called "Fragments of a *Ceq'e*," Vicuña discusses the *ceq'e* in relation to poetry and the voice:

Un sistema que cohería para ellos
 y que hoy
 es un gesto 'sin sentido'.
 El hilo pobre, incoherente, perdido, flota en el vacío.

[. . . .]

El *ceq'e* es una línea
 o una forma de relación?
 Los mensajes circulan por el hilo
 como el agua en el canal.

¿Has visto como viaja el agua
 por un hilo de lana?
 Pura hilación
 Pura circulación.

A system that had coherence for them
 and that today
 is a gesture "without meaning."
 The poor, incoherent, lost
 thread floats in the void.

[. . . .]

The *ceq'e* is a line
 or a form of relation?
 Messages circulate along the thread
 like the water in the channel.

Have you seen how water travels
 along a thread of wool?
 Pure threadness
 Pure circulation.

Vicuña describes one of her own poems as "'the *quipu* that remembers nothing,' an empty string, my first precarious work" (*UW* 5). In trying to remember (*recordar*) how the *quipu* is written, she notes the correspondence between *recordar* and *cuerdas*, the strings of memory. Memory and language exist in relation to the activity and materials of weaving, its *hilación* and *circulación* composing the very architecture of a city. Vicuña evokes memory and writing in the Buffalo performance, speaking a myth that seems to be a joking Andean version of Socrates' complaint that alphabetic writing would diminish the memory:

now

because of this
almost funny request to speak of myth
I would just like to say
a couple of myths
that are pertinent I think to this moment

both from south america
one of them
is a contemporary myth
one that accounts for the origin of
people
who write
and people
who sing

and in this myth
the gods have created
the indigenous people of south america and
they have created them with great memory so
only through song
they can remember the history
of the whole
people

so
instead
the gods created some people
who have no memory so because they have not
this gift of memory

they were created with a little notebook in their hands
and these people are the europeans [laughing]