Rhythmical Ambivalence of Poetry Performance:
The Case of Elizabethan Verse
[2011]

The basically uncoded prosodic dimension of language in writing gives room for variations in verse delivery which may lead to highly divergent poetry performance practices. These fulfil different functions of artistic activity and reflect contrastive stylistic impulses and aesthetic positionings, ranging from more casual, ‘plain’, ‘drab’, information-oriented style variants to more formal, ‘eloquent’, ‘golden’, ‘musically’-informed ones.

This paper presents a case study from the Elizabethan period, when two distinctive types of language pronunciation were practiced (which, following Kuryłowicz, can be explained in linguistic terms as ‘morphological’ vs. ‘syllabic’) and when extensive rhythmical experimentation in verse took place (e.g., Sidney’s ‘classical metres’). Such variations in performance style can be explained by identifying oppositional art-ideological positions that inform them. They reflect the historical transition in the Elizabethan age from humanist-inspired to rationalist conceptions of poetry, and at the same time represent more generally relevant contrastive positionings in the world of the arts.

As the programme of this conference vividly shows, there is indeed an enormous range of options to discuss performative aspects in the field of word and music studies1. Yet, interestingly, only a few are concerned with the performative dimension of poetry, that is, with the actual delivery aspect of reading poetry out loud. To the extent that nowadays poetry is read at all, it is mostly read in private, at a silent reading, the main focus of which is a search of meaning as an intellectual challenge, as an intimate, exclusively mental activity. It is true, we have public poetry readings today and their popularity, as far as it goes, is a product of the cultural upheavals in the 1960s, that decisive watershed that brought music, poetry, the arts in general, out of the closet onto the street and in front of a wider general, primarily young, public. And, certainly, there are recent developments in ‘performance poetry’ (see, e.g., Gräbner/Casas, eds. 2011; Novak 2011), and we have audio books at times also offering poetry for our ears.

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1 In view of its topic, the oral character of the conference delivery of this paper, which included poetry recitation, has been preserved in this written version.
The withdrawal of poetry into the private sphere was, from a historical perspective, largely a consequence of a decisive change in the conception of rhetoric as it took place in the later Renaissance period. At that time, Pierre de la Rameé, or Petrus Ramus, developed his dialectic and a logically oriented view of rhetoric, which superseded the then prevailing Ciceronian school of rhetoric. Cicero had developed his well-known five-step system of rhetoric (inventio – dispositio – elocutio – memoria – pronuntiatio), and the Humanists had put a strong emphasis on ‘eloquence’ and ‘pronunciation’ in this system, i.e., on those elements that concentrate on the performative side of speaking. Ramus’s innovation, by stressing the logical and dialectical side of poetry, implied a marked downgrading of the performative aspect of speaking and thereby a fundamental reorientation as to the questions of what is (the aim of) poetry and what one should do with a poem. Ramist rhetoric is the source of the modern ‘Lesegedicht’ with its emphasis on the search for meaning, introspective reflection and meditation. Ciceronian rhetoric, by contrast, had stressed the physical delivery aspect and the aspect of effective speaking, of articulating poetry with a persuasive purpose in the public sphere. It was this performative side of poetry in the context of humanist-inspired rhetoric that lined up Renaissance poetry with contemporary music, a field where also effectiveness of delivery – mainly in terms of being able to ‘move the passions’ through music – had become a central concern.

As a consequence of this fascinating fundamental change of perspective on the function of poetry during the Renaissance period, I have chosen to talk about this interesting transitional period in my attempt to discuss performative aspects of poetry in more general terms, with a focus on the situation in England. So the question I am trying to answer is: what do we know about the way in which poetry was orally performed, in the Ciceronian context, before it turned into an activity of silent meditative concentration? And we will see that more than one style of verse delivery was available at the time, and that in fact two contrasting performative principles can be identified as having been active,

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3 For the influence of Ramism on poetry cf. Bernhart (1993: 226), and generally on contemporary performative rhetoric see Bornstein (1983).