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In and Out of Performance

By altering the focus of folkloristics from the study of texts in transmission to the analysis of "artistic communications in small groups", we have rearranged our primary concerns from the lore to the folk. That this has been a useful move is not under dispute, for we now are able to characterize the socio-cultural environment of traditional expression in ever-finer detail. But in the excitement of entering into this important discussion of man's creative capacities, we have manufactured a number of problem points which now need discussion and clarification. By allowing ourselves to redefine folklore with regard to its artistic dimensions, and how the size and social character of the community enter into the creative and re-creation process, we have forgotten that a great number of our basic concerns are not, in fact, artistic performances. Games, festivals and rituals, for instance, are alternative traditional expressive occasions which are neither artistic nor held in small groups. To be sure, their very expressivity has led us to describe these activities in performance terms. But a game is a game, not a performance, and to regard the one as an example of the other is to commit an error of common sense. We need to develop a methodology for describing games (and festivals, and rituals) which are appropriate to them but which can utilize some of the insights developed in the performance-centered methodology.

Another critical problem has arisen with the change in the definition of folklore. By emphasizing the expressive and artistic factors in small group communication, we now find ourselves in need of making discretions with regard to what communications are artistic and what aren't. In essence this means that we find ourselves confronted with the need to place performances within the communication system of the community under investigation. It is this problem which I will address, in this essay, seeking to show what resonant meanings *performance* has in English and thus where we might begin to describe the continuities and contrasts between everyday unselfconscious expression

activities and the more reflexive stylized activities of folk groups, however they may be defined.

Using *performance* as the central term for any cultural argument involves certain obvious problems, for in everyday talk and academic discussion we employ the term in a number of different senses. (See esp.: Hymes, 1972; Goffman, 1974, 224 ff; Bauman, 1976; Ben-Amos and Goldstein.) One special difficulty – it has been appropriated as a term-of-art in Chomskyan linguistics, referring to 'rendered talk' in contrast to competence. But there is an ordinary sense in which *a performance* refers to the unique coming together of a special occasion, a performer or performers, a tradition involving past experiences on similar occasions, and an audience capable of observing and judging by aesthetic criteria. In this pure sense, the term operates distinctly, describing a special kind of focussed interaction in which a great many conventions and uses are called into play so that we know what to look forward to, and how we may appropriately respond should our expectations be lived up to.

Performance when it is used on less specially licensed and set-aside occasions operates in analogy to performance-proper. By employing pure performance or performance--proper for this state of socio-aesthetical excitation and celebration, as I noted, I do not mean to ignore in any way the self-conscious dimension of other kinds of scenes. To the contrary, what I attempt here is to establish the continuities between behavior in other kinds of scenes and events and these more fully focussed and stylized enactments.

Del Hymes makes an imposing contrast between behavior, conduct and performance that is useful here: "there is *behavior*, anything and everything that happens; there is *conduct*, behavior under the aegis of social norms, cultural rules; there is *performance*, when one or more persons assume responsibility for presentation" (Hymes, 1975, 18). These three vary directly with the degree of attention to the ordering particulars of acts, especially the ways in which they are carried out. Conduct would seem to involve the sort of monitoring with regard to the obligatory that we discussed with reference to ritual. On the other hand, performance achieves its status because responsibility is assumed by the designated performers, and because of the openness of presentation by which the activities are underscored as morally and aesthetically significant. Responsibility, then, relates both to the level of self-consciousness in the form and subject of the enactment and to the social norms by which those highlighted actions are judged as good or bad, graceful or awkward.

In both behavior and performance we observe interactional rules. But in everyday behavior, the rules act as guidelines by which participation and exchange are facilitated; in performance-play, on the other hand, the behavioral options, including both the interactional languages and the activity itself, are considerably more restricted. The transaction occurs between individuals who are, in some way, "not themselves". In ordinary interactions, an attempt is made by each participant to establish identity by self-casting in a role and by pursuing an expressive "line" consistent with that role. In *pure performance*, role is self-consciously divided – the performer establishing distance between his real-self as player and the role he is playing.

This division between the real- and the player-self is a tricky one at best, for there are those performers, even in the most unelaborated societies, who use the license of performing to allow the more real self to speak out. Lyric poets, given the conventions of the closeted performance (i.e., both writer and reader address each other in seclusion, discoursing on the social state of seclusion) draw upon this subjunctive modality of

presentation of self, speaking as if they are both fictional and yet more real in that situation than any other, The performer has these many stances of self constantly available, and often manipulates pronouns and terms to keep one guessing as to how "personal" his points of reference are getting. The "I" is confused with the impersonal or proverbial "thay" or "one"; the "is" becomes the "ought" or "will be" in many strange ways.

Not that this is either a confusing or even a weak strategy of presentation. In fact, it is precisely this ambiguity which the poetic system employs as a means of establishing maneuvering space for performers, as playful means of testing the boundaries between the real and the fictive worlds. Furthermore, performers themselves often play in this ambiguity. In the United States, for instance, bluesmen have been especially articulate on the subject because of the identification, by the audience, of the singer and the songs he composes and sings. Especially if he performs for white audiences, he is constantly asked about the relationships between his songs and his life. For instance, the noted bluesman John Lee Hooker responding to such a question, notes that:

> You can hear a certain type of record be playin'. You can be feelin' very normal, nothin' on your mind, period. But it's somethin' that have happened in your life. and sometime if you can't stand to listen to the record you take a walk or take a ride or get in your car because you don't want to be hurt so deep that it cause heartaches and things. Because you'd rather not to hear it than to hear it. Because there's somethin' sad in there that give you the blues; somethin' that reach back in your life or in some friend's life of yours, or that make you think of what have happened today and it is so true, that if it didn't happen to you, you still got a strong idea – you know those things is goin' on. So this is very touchable, and that develops into the blues (Oliver, 164).

The songmaker-performer then finds his place, bringing focussed energies and craft into the moment of performance. Through fabricating an artistic object, an *item* of performance, the reception accorded the performer relies all-too-obviously on the responses of others, on how much coordinated response is triggered by the enactment. The response itself will be determined by how well the performer controls his medium and successfully channels his energies; but it also relies on how fully the item responds to actual scenes from life – or as Hooker puts it, how "touchable" a common situation is, and therefore how much it "hits you" as a human being who is also a member of an audience and a community.

The dialectic between art and life: on the one hand, we witness the interplay of artist and genre; on the other between the artist as the voice of tradition and as one who speaks in his own voice from personal experience. In non-traditional communities, the performer must increasingly demand that the audience wonder how much he sings of himself and how much he draws on conventional observation and artistic fabrication. Even artists who perform the works of others beg the question of originality and authenticity in choice of repertoire of which works they play on which occasion, and by the intensity and stylistic nuance by which they are played on that occasion. Again, this is not simply a problem confronted by the sophisticated artist who expresses himself reflexively, like a Hemingway or a Proust, making of his life a work of art. Listen to another blues singer, Henry Thomas, holding forth on "me, not me", speaker in his songs:

> There's several types of blues – there's blues that connects you with personal life – I mean you can tell it to the public as a song, in a song. But I mean, they don't take it seriously which you are tellin' the truth about. They don't always think seriously that it's exactly you that you talkin' about. At the same time it could be you, more or less it would be you for you to have the feelin'. You express yourself in a song like that. Now this particular thing reach others because they have experienced the same condition in life so naturally they feel what you are sayin' because it happened to them. It's sort of think that you kinda like to hold to yourself, yet you want somebody to know it. I don't know how you say that two ways; you like somebody to know it, yet you hold it to yourself. Now I've had the feelin' which I have disposed it in a song, but there's some things that have happened to me that I wouldn't dare tell, not to tell – but I would sing about them. Because people in general they take the song as an explanation for themselves – they believe this song is expressing their feelin's instead of the one that singin' it. They feel that maybe I have just hit upon somethin' that's in their lives, and yet at the same time it was some of the things that went wrong with me too (Oliver, 1965, 164–165).

This is not to argue that life follows art, or vice-versa, or that to sing the blues, you must experience them. Rather, there is a space between life and art within which the performer and his audience exchanges the particulars of aesthetic and moral experience, an exchange held self-consciously. This is a space in which we expect, indeed count on, a mix-up of personal pronouns, an inner discussion as to whether the lyric exposes the singer or just life itself, including the experience of the hearer.

This self-consciousness of the performer is one of the defining characteristics of performance. Indeed, there seems to be a minimal set of conditions for events of pure performance: 1) occasions and situations in which performance is approved, indeed, expected, and which therefore carry a residuum of energies which the performance brings into focus or coordination; 2) members of the community who are given license to perform; 3) conventional patterns of expectation, stylized ideal types of expression announced by the framing of the event by which the participative energies of the performer and audience may be coordinated to some degree; and 4) a repertoire of actual items of performance which fill the formal requirements of the generic expectations are available to performers, and thus are regarded as appropriate to these performance events (cf. Hymes, 1974, 51–62).

For a performance to occur then, there must be a coming together of acknowledged performers, marked times and places and occasions of performance, a generic sense by which the performance may be followed and participated in (i.e., energies shared) and a tradition which carries with it items of performance appropriately employed by performers on those specific occasions. This argument would pose no descriptive problems were it not that one school of commentators or another has defined performances with reference to only one of these dimensions – for example, when an item of performance is mistaken for the whole event. Each of these dimensions may be observed in communicative interaction other than in performances; the more they are found together the more we tend to agree that a performance is going on, and that a social activity has also become an aesthetic event.

The problems of definition have been confounded because performance terms have been employed to describe the ordering of everyday behaviors. Kenneth Burke's dramatistic model has been paralleled by the work of the symbolic interactionist and role-theory sociologist, all drawing upon the language of theatrical performances to describe the "acting out" of non-theatrical scripts (Burke, 1945; Goffman, 1959; Burns; but see Messenger et al., 1962). Yet the difference between situated behavior and a theatrical or a literary piece is patent: the analyst must interpose his own description of behavior to make an interaction a "scene" or a text. It is the reporting and not the behavior itself then which is subject to "literary" analysis. But this act of interpretation is, after all, merely a more self-conscious and finely articulated rendering of part of ordinary social process – we all interpret behavior as gossips and friends-in-common constantly if not quite so fully as either apologists, novelists, or semioticians.

Whether we agree on what the underlying patterns are and how many alternative modes of behavior may be accommodated within a scene or event, we have little difficulty in agreeing upon some portion of that underlying set of rules or expectation patterns that make up the basis of our socio-cultural lives. These norms, in fact, provide the kind of expectations which, when fulfilled, make us feel comfortable, so that we can "be ourselves". Or they are the sort of patterning which, when they are not understood fully or not accepted wholly by others are potential sources of embarrassment, confusion, or a judgment that the others must be insane. Each familiar scene that we enter into, then, has a kind of scenario, a schema which is part of a community's equipment for living, carried into recurrent scenes in common by the participants. And each event has an equally patterned set of scenes, a cluster of interrelated interpretable activities that are related in an equally familiar way. Each scene and event, however, is brought to life most fully by those entering into it with these expectations, but with a need to push them to the limits of unacceptability. That is, in describing the 'norms' of behavior one should never forget the ones in our midst who constantly test that norm for purposes of social enlivenment.

All enactments share this sense of underlying form and, patterned expectation of development. But it is through the mimesis, the initiation of life in performances that we come to recognize these familiar occasions and the sentiments conventionally attached to the scenes as they develop. Which is not to argue that it is only through *performance* that we come to recognize the typical. But the involvement of performances in helping us become conscious of typicality, and in guiding our sentiments within the enactment provides us with a commonsense way of being able to think about and talk about life as well as live it. This is why, of all the enactment forms, performances are the ones which most nearly approximate everyday life, and in which we can therefore draw on the relationship most often and most fully.

It is precisely these shared patterns of expectation which, when they are employed in a state of pure performance, we call *genres*. Genre, especially as the term is employed in performance-centered discussions, means the accrued patterns of expectation carried in common into aesthetic encounters by performers and audience members. Such a generic approach underscores the means by which participation and interpretation is encouraged. As Jonathan Culler notes, with regard to literary performance: "Genres are no longer taxonomic classes, but groups of norms and expectations which help the reader assign functions to various elements of the work" (Culler, 28). Insofar as all interactional events involve formalities and appropriate languages (variously referred to also as media,

'codes', 'registers', 'varieties', or 'dictions'), the differences between performance on the level of genre and other more casual interaction lie primarily in the intensive way in which the formal elements are marked and framed, so that the occasion carried with it that special cue that announces that that special kind of intensive play called performance is going on.

As with any language development, for the performance event to succeed, there must be a mutual *competence* of both performer and audience arising from the common expectations and understandings surrounding the genre. Thus, we may distinguish between the *productive competence* of the performer and the *receptive competence* of the audience. The former recognizes that performers draw upon genres as "an invitation to form" (Guillen, 107), utilizing conventional pattern-markers in channeling their creative energies and in terms that can be followed by the audience. The latter points to the audience's capacity to accept this invitation, their familiarity with the pattern and the markers, and their ability to bring their past experience with similarly situated performances to bear on the present experience as a means of understanding, participating in and judging what is going on.

Though performances are highly stylized modes of interaction, the recognition of generic schemas is no more immediate than the similiar naming of scenes and events in less formal and marked occasions. Furthermore, the same competencies are involved in everyday scenes, though we don't judge behavior by quite the same criteria as performance. But there is a very great difference between the competencies and the expectation patterns carried in common into the interaction when the communication is conversational, and when it is openly designated a performance. In the case of the former, it is openly designated a performance. In the case of the former, it is precisely these patterns which the interactants, by convention, decide to bracket out, to overlook; while in the latter, the patterns provide the basis of what is foregrounded, highlighted, defining the occasion as a performance. To be sure, in performances a similar bracketing out occurs in the very dimension of the interaction which is most fully stressed in conversational scenes. Conversations openly mark those dimensions of the communication which stress the relationship between the participants. Any elements of formal style in conversation must, therefore, be made to seem to arise by chance and must be explained away or overlooked. Performances, on the other hand, highlight such stylistic effects. This emphasis on style is what Bauman refers to when he notes that performance holds up communication to aesthetic judgment by causing us to focus on manner and formal control as well as content (Bauman, 1977). But it should also be noticed that by so doing, performances tend to bracket out any marking of interpersonal exchange taking place between performer and audience. This is not to say that there are no such reminders – to the contrary, it is just such meta-devices which are crucial in maintaining the interpersonal dimension, but we agree by this fiction about fictions, to judge these as non-defining features of the genre (Babcock in Bauman, 1977). With performance items and genres we agree to recognize only the formal and stylized features of expression and mask out those informal means by which the interpersonal contact is obtained.

With both items and genres of performance the most profound structural feature is the "idea" of the genre or item. We would expect one who has a performance competence (productive or receptive) to be able to give a schematic rendering of generic characteristics and constraints, as well as the general lineaments of representative items as

they conform to the genre. But we could point to a similar capacity for a rendering of the scenarios or scripts of everyday scenes and events.

Scripting indicates that the interaction is usefully to be interpreted as a dramatic narrative which develops through accumulated experience, direct and indirect (through reportings of the sexual activity of others, through personal observation).

Participants in sexual interactions, for instance, are mutually aware of such a scripting. By engaging in the requisite exchanges, they implicitly accept the roles and role-relationship suggested by the existence of the scripts. In fact, lovers (or would-be lovers) must make a number of moves or this particular dance of life breaks down. Not that such interactions are wholly determined; there are, obviously enough, a wide variety of ways in which seduction or some other kind of sexual coming together may be carried out, thus a number of places in the script at which vital choices are to be made.

With the love-making script the differences between life and art are clear; though there may be a recognition by the participants that they are following a script, they also maintain the fiction that this recognition will not be openly acknowledged. "Just playing a role" or "walking through a scene" destroys the very basis of trust on which the relationship is predicated. Furthermore, such accusations may be made if the lovers are not in full agreement as to where they are in the script.

Not only is learning to "make love" thus scripted; it is observable part of a longer script, that of courtship, which is itself one kind of drama in the even larger epic movement of growing up. The relationship between the various levels of scripting is crucial, of course, in an understanding of the developmental pattern. The questions, asked by a beginner in any developing set of scenes, "What do I do next?" indicates that there is not only a recognition of a wholeness to the scripting but an ability to discuss the vital interrelation of the parts as well as an apprehension of the overall conformation of the pattern.

Perhaps I am arguing little more than that communication events may have imposed upon them a sense of beginning, middle, and end, and that there are stylistic cues arising from the event which not only give persistent clues as to what kind of interaction is being carried on but approximately where the participants are in the life history of the event. The same may be said, only more so of performances. A difference lies in the openness by which the exchange is marked, and therefore the degree of stylization, predictability, and redundancy acknowledged as a formal part of the scene. Openness of framing, cueing, and underlining, moreover, permits a potentially higher degree of coordination and focus.

Performance is thus characterizable in terms of the formal integrity of the items and the use of conventional and highly marked characteristics as a means of maintanining a high level of participation. But this degree of self-conscious formalization is only one of the set of defining characteristics of performance. Furthermore, there are a number of scene and event-types which are notable for their high degree of formality and predictability, but which are clearly not pure-performances — scenes such as conferences, receptions, formal dinners, even saying mass.

Indeed, one way we classify scene-types is with regard to their relative formality and singularity of focus. We have, for instance, a number of scenes, all of which might be termed "conversations" because the register employed is conversational, and the basic interactional rule is the "I-talk-you-listen; you-talk-I-listen" one associated with nearly all states-of-talk in Western Culture. All participants ideally have access to entering the

conversation. Obviously, the more formal the scene, the greater limitations on where one may gain this access. These scenes vary with regard to formality or role-relation or situation, and with the intensity of the discussion. Thus we distinguish such conversational scenes as "just talking", "having a conversation", "brainstorming", "holding a seminar", "having a meeting", and so on, with regard to how much formality is brought to bear on the occasion – that is, how overt the rule system is which guarantees access to the state-of-talk. Notice also, that the more formal the occasion the longer the period each participant is given to talk, the more careful his presentation must be (i.e., the point being made must be kept clear, as must the relevance of each segment of talk to that point), the more spatial environment will be clearly divided, the more fixed to a place in the environment the participant becomes, and so forth.

There are other dimensions of conversation which may reflect increasing depth and intensity. For instance, the more fully an occasion is framed and prepared for, the greater the formality and therefore the more monitoring of the interactional code will occur. Though we may feel that we are talking personally and in ordinary conversational ways when we bump into a friend on the street, when we meet at a cocktail party, a formal dinner, in a receiving line, or at a funeral, we also know that there is an increasing sense of formality in this set of scenes, that we are more self-conscious about our relationships on the more formal occasions and we are therefore more studied about how we speak and what we discuss. Furthermore, on some of these occasions, everyday roles may be so intensified that the interaction becomes stylized to the point of virtually making "canned" speeches (such as a father-of-the-bride makes to even his best friends at the wedding reception). Such rehearsed or learned strips of talk are more likely to arise during periods of great stress, such as when we know we are going to 'have a scene' with someone, and we consequently go over, in our heads, what we want to say, so that it may not only "come out right" but also eloquently.

Not only a sensing of social hierarchy induces this growing use of formulaic and formal conventions, dramatizing antagonisms will do the same, especially in situations in which the conflict is, by consent, controlled. Again one can observe a progression (or declension) from "conversations" to "discussions" to "heated discussions" to "arguments" to "having it out". Furthermore, there are other scenes of conflict which still maintain the conversational back and forth ways of talking but which are even more fully pre-formulated – scenes such as debates, trials, hearings, and so forth. In such events, not only are the rules of access to talk more fully spelled out, but rule-keepers are appointed to guarantee that access.

With the increasing formalization and the accompanying growth of self-consciousness in the interaction, the scenes become more performance-like. The closer to the surface the marking places in the schema are, the more we judge behavior by the performance criteria of appropriateness of style as well as content. But so long as conversational rules apply, the fiction of spontaneity and open access to the state-of-talk must be maintained. Though such scenes may seem rehearsed, they are not in fact rehearsable in the same sense that pure performances are. This is obvious enough if one compares real and a dramatized conversation in a play, for the staged interaction contains many cues which remind the audience that they are not just overhearing the interaction but being "let in" on it. These cues consist of a number of stylistic features, all of which represent modification of conversational patterns to help the audience "overhear" more clearly. Thus, there is considerably less voice overlap (a stylistic intensification of the

"I-talk, you-listen, you-talk, I-listen rule) a slower pacing, amplification, a modification of eye-contact possibilities so as to include the audience, and so on. The pacing of the stage-conversation also allows for audience response, especially in the case of comedy. Furthermore, the staged enactment is framed in a very different manner given the occasion, the stage setting, and the behavioral cues that announce that the roles being enacted are not "real" – i.e., are not to be employed by these players in any place but in this setting and on this occasion.

Intensification and formalization then bring the everyday closer to pure performance. The same could be said for introducing playful motives into the encounter, for joking also makes participants more conscious of the formal dimension of any expressive transaction. Furthermore, play of any sort (performance-play or otherwise), may deepen in response to a growing social investment. With performance, game or even festive-play the more agonistic the motive of the playing, the greater will be the formality, the greater the amount of "practice" is appropriate, and the more self-conscious the rules and the stylistic niceties become (Geertz, 1973, 412–453). Though *agon* is the prime feature of game-play, it also operates in some kinds of performances (like flyting, scolding, playing the dozens, and other such formal yet playful castigations). Of course, agon provides the dramatic interest in theatrical performances and much mummery in dialogue.

The numerous types of intensifying procedures operate in performances, but drawing on vocabularies of heightened awareness characteristic of this mode of enactive playing. The most obvious of such devices arise from the meta-dimension of performances – with the use of say, plays within plays, or songs about writing songs or the experience of singing them. Such reflexivity underscores the special position in which the performer puts himself forward as leader of the revels. But meta-performance factors will also confuse the performer-audience relationship because of the pronoun-questions they bring up. When a singer, for instance, sings about his guitar, his song, his experiences as a singer in front of an audience or on the road, he is casting doubt on the assumed distinction between the singer and the speaking persona within the song. Does he represent himself, in his situations and sentiments, or simply an idealized singing figure, reflecting on the conventional situations presented within the song.

With sung songs we enter into the situation of performance-proper in the main. Singing, with its shifting of vocabularies, codes, and conventions, is also available in less intense scenes, ones in which a song or a snatch of one, simply is used as a quotative device in the midst of a more casual, conversational interaction. Embedding a song in a conversation is certainly more strange-making than introducing, say, a proverb into this kind of interaction; but obviously the differences of kind of degree rather than kind. Both involve a shifting of the pronoun system, and by extension, a diminution in the degree of responsibility for the quoted words of the proverb or song taken by the speaker. This shift of "voice" is one of the most common devices of heightening awareness.

To express oneself at all, one must be given license to engage in talk. What we are really concerned with in pure performance however, is obtaining the license to suspend everyday interactional rules, "to hold the floor" as it were, to engage in a range and intensity of expressive activities that play around with interactions, roles and other social norms and ordering devices. To successfully seize such license, one must develop capacities which justify, through the demonstration of expressive control, the relaxation of these rules.

In each culture conventions accumulated through experience remind community members of when and how performance may occur. These conventions assist in interpreting the event, in framing it and providing the cues that tell us constantly where we are. These conventions prepare us for the rhythmic consistencies and repetitions which are essential to the experience and to participation in community entertainment and celebration.[1]

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[1] This essay is an except from a book-in-process, presently entitled "A Poetics of Everyday Life". In it, I attempt to distinguish between different types of play: games, festivals and celebration and performance. Each type of expressive occasion is discussed in its "pure" form and in relation to the employment of its play motives in everyday interactions. The argument is marked by the semantic limitations of drawing on the key terms as they are used in American English.