

## **Poetic Text in Contemporary Voice Training: A re-positioning (Draft February 7<sup>th</sup> 2014)**

### **Introduction**

A debate circulated in the pages of the UK's New Theatre Quarterly (47 (1996): 249-58, 49 (1997): 48-52, 50: 183, 51 (1997): 248- 54 ) throughout 1996-7 which situated centre-stage a debate about the role of text in UK voice training and the privileged position accorded to Shakespeare. Sarah Werner, a feminist theatre scholar, began the debate when she argued against the limitations posed by the 'natural' and 'free' voice approach to training actors' voices in relation to the canonical texts (NTQ 47: 250), specifically citing the work of Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg and Kristin Linklater. In an unprecedented move, the three master voice trainers responded (NTQ49).

My response (51 (1997): 248- 54), mediated Werner's accusations of practitioner essentialism and their rebuttals to Werner. I believed, along with the practitioners, that the application of text in voice practice had been misunderstood. I also felt, however, that Werner had a point. Voice practice did indeed appear to be riddled with assumption about the 'naturalized' conditions of the voice over those of social construction and it needed challenging.

Over a decade and a half later, I still concern myself with this issue as a voice professional and one who trains future voice trainers through the MA/MFA-Voice Studies course at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The relationship between voice performance and text particularly drew my attention recently because of the deaths of two significant British voice practitioners, Elizabeth Pursey (1923-2012) and Betty Mulcahy (1920-2012). Their approaches to voice and text offer another way of working alongside the currently popular "natural" or "free" voice approach. Although there are differences of outlook and position, Pursey and Mulcahy can be positioned within the same tradition from which

Cicely Berry's work emerged. Unlike Berry's well-documented approach to training through her various books, Pursey and Mulcahy have left behind little or no written legacy.<sup>1</sup> Their recent passing affords an opportunity to ensure that their legacy is properly reflected in the current discussions about voice and text in the new millennium.

Pursey's practice will not be examined here, since to do justice to her work lies outside the scope of this short piece. However, I want to signal the importance of her legacy and suggest it should be examined in full at a later stage. Her views on voice and verse set benchmarks for a generation of voice practitioners, particularly those who were based at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in the mid to late part of the twentieth century, and it will be important to review these.

Instead, I offer here a first-person reflection and critical analysis of Mulcahy's studio work which has here-to-for never been published. I re-position voice and text in the studio based upon an inclusive dialogue between the Berry/Pursey legacies, my own experience of Mulcahy's coaching practice and elements of postmodern critical theory. In doing so, I hope to add another aspect to practitioner and scholarly understanding of the UK traditional approach to voicing text. Perhaps this analysis can also offer further insights on the issues that sparked the very public debate in NTQ.

## **The Question**

In her NTQ article that sparked the debate, Werner began with the premise that the work of Linklater, Berry, and Rodenburg collectively "spread voice work into rehearsal spaces and classrooms across Britain and North America" and had "strongly influenced how [Shakespearean] plays are performed (NTQ 47: 249)." Her aim was to interrogate the "ideology behind the training and the methods of reading and acting which voice training produces . . . (ibid)." In examining the training, she chose to examine only the training texts, not the studio work. Of the training texts, she critically analyzed the discursive passages and not the written exercises. She asserts, "Even if an actor would want to reject the implicit ideology of voice training . . . sh/he would find that this ideology pervades even the more practical aspects of voice

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<sup>1</sup> Mulcahy published two books with a small circulation, both now out of print. The first was *To Speak True* published by Pergamon Press in 1969 and the second was *How to Speak a Poem*, self published in 1990 and re-printed in 2011.

training (251)". Because she limited her investigation, she does not/can not point to where in the practical exercises one might find this.

Here I offer an emphasis on the studio work of a master voice practitioner, contemporary of Berry, as a counterpoint to Werner's text examination. What exists within the studio that might offer new insights to the teacher/student voice training relationship as applied to text? The question considers the relationship of poetic text and voice within the UK's conservatoire voice training. I suggest ways in which the work can be re-positioned for the contemporary political and cultural landscape by an examination of the meanings generated in the studio relationship between student, teacher and the poetic text.

The premise of my question is that analyzing both the written exercises within the training texts and the adjunct values of the poetic text does not adequately reflect how practices are transmitted or embodied, literally placed in the body of the performer, which is understood as "organic" and "truthful." If Werner wishes to "escape the need to be organic and true" as a "stumbling block in the way of feminist performances (257)," I argue that one must first look to the studio, and not the training texts, to better understand the role of the training in embodiment praxis.

Werner's investigation can be understood through a larger discourse surrounding the place of text and the authority of the author. Here I borrow from Barthes's twentieth century view about the relationship between author, text and the reader:

As institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; ...(Barthes, 1976).

Barthes's pronouncement about the demise of the author emerges out of a wider socio-political, literary and philosophical critique of the 'effects of the western imperialism which has dominated the world since the sixteenth century', and in which language is deemed to have played a significant role (Fortier, 1997):

One facet of post-colonial work is to challenge the canon of western art, a challenge which takes myriad forms, from outright rejection to reappropriation and reformulation. (Fortier, 1997)

The challenge to the artistic canon is reinforced by the attention Barthes paid to the structures that maintain this... ‘formidable paternity...’ and highlights that text and author are subject to ‘establishing and renewing’ and are not, fixed or eternal (Barthes, 1976).

Whilst this critique is common within the Academy more widely, it is less frequently articulated in the voice studio where the work on poetic text and voice is categorized by a different sense of purpose. In this context, the work is designed to expose students to a range of poetics in relation to their own artistic and expressive development. The deconstruction of the text (either exercise based or poetic) as a site of power is not a primary aim, although discussion might be held, for example, about the impact of the verse canon on an individual’s sense of their potential as a speaker. The philosophical premise work of Berry and Rodenburg, in particular, testify to this as a possibility. (Berry’s *The Text in Action* and Rodenburg’s *The Right to Speak* respectively address this in both their exercise sequences and prose analysis).

In a Central School of Speech and Drama colloquium in 2000 about voice practice in the UK drama schools, I delivered a short response to the chair about the importance of drawing a sharper distinction between literary approaches (and assumptions about student access to them) and those pertaining to embodied oral/speech and voice experience in the studio:

“We have got gender, we have got literacy access, we have got power, we have got class staring you (sic) in the face. It really brings you up short and I think (of) something about un-hooking their actor’s intelligence from a literary awareness and then bringing it and re-couping it in another way, through the body... (Boston, 2000)

This statement acknowledges a nexus of power, culture, gender, and the body, typically featured in publications by Rodenburg, Berry and Linklater, and advocates the circumnavigation of the literary canon’s hegemony in experiential voice training. This paper aims to further examine the reasons why the theorization of

voice, culture and power in the training studio takes a secondary position to the experiential working methods on voice with the 'privileged' position it affords to the poetic text.

In this paper, whilst there are several 'texts' implied at any one time as they pertain to exercise sequences for voice and the prose analysis of such sequences, the primary focus of scrutiny will be the poetic text and its position in studio voice training.

## **Methodology**

A Practice as Research (PaR) examination will afford the opportunities to compare and contrast the traditions of voice practice and to locate currents and tensions where they exist in relation to the use of verse text. Formed of three parts, I will draw upon two case study academic presentations and a third situated in a voice coaching/mentee context, to investigate the values within each and from which to suggest alternative perspectives about the voicing of poetry in the training studio.

The methodological frame of PaR allows me to draw upon personal reflection, pedagogy and performance experience. Leading UK performance theorist Baz Kershaw has defined this PaR as "the uses of practical creativity as reflexive enquiry into significant research concerns..." (2009, 4). PaR as a methodology has been chosen to allow the embracing of a series of self-reflexive performative experiences upon which to base further critical understanding of verse speaking in its training and performance contexts. It is these experiences in the main, rather than postmodern critical theory that will provide the evidence for this discussion.

The approach in this paper also takes note of a wider autoethnographic tradition of inquiry that is well established within the PaR paradigm <sup>2</sup> In this way my subjectivity 'in the field' is both legitimized and framed within a wider critical context. This will take account of the psychophysical sensations experienced as observer, participant, and performer to enlarge upon what is known. In so doing, PaR enables me to take full account of

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<sup>2</sup>. (Tami Spry's 2001 *Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis*, St Cloud State University, provides an excellent model in this respect.)

reflective, experiential and conceptual ways of knowing. It enables me more fully to engage with the multi-layered reasoning behind the prominence of verse text in the voice studio and to interrogate the impact and effectiveness of the methods that utilize text.

## **The Research Events**

The first event in my PaR project was a lecture demonstration I gave to the Institute for Musical Research (IMR) study day at the University of London in May 2011. This presentation involved the speaking of Elizabeth Bishop's verse with interspersions of biographical commentary about her life. It was structured to evoke responses to the verse content from the audience, as well as to afford me the first hand experience of delivering her spoken verse in public. (The web link to this lecture demonstration is [www.songart.co.uk](http://www.songart.co.uk) in the video archive).

Whilst audience feedback about my reading was limited to just a few comments, due to scheduling pressures, the event provided a valuable opportunity for reflection about the challenges involved in both communicating and, on the part of the listener, the impact of a number of different narrative and poetic forms.

The second PaR event was provided by leading contemporary poet Alice Oswald in her capacity as curator of a celebration of the work of poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). This took place in May 2011 in the grounds and rooms of Sharpham House near Totnes in South Devon (UK). It was at Oswald's invitation that I gave a reading of Bishop's work, along with a number of other readings by poets, amongst whom was the UK's ex poet laureate Andrew Motion and Liverpool poet, Brian Patten.

The third event was provided by the experience of my coaching/mentee relationship with Mulcahy, undertaken in order to prepare for the performance of Bishop's work.

## **The Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop**

Bishop's poetics proved foundational to the project and gave a consistent element to all its three iterations <sup>i</sup>

"Surprise... The subject and the language which conveys it should surprise you. You should be surprised at seeing something new and strangely alive"

(cited in Monteiro 1996, xiii).

The quality of “surprise”, as it formed part of Bishop’s distinctive compositional style, provided a link to my own voice practice within a Stanislavsky-based approach in which attentiveness to the specificity of the impact of the body-mind sensations in the present tense is promoted. This in –the- moment- breath impulse based voice expressivity is one that underpins many voice and acting projects in the UK and the US in which the written text is deployed:

...those [projects] focusing on the actor’s engagement with character and story, and conveying a sense of something significant being lived in the present moment in front of an audience. (Blair 2008, 4)

We can say that the speaker who is able to attach this in- the- moment breath impulse to that of the image in the text also links to Bishop’s compositional aim of structuring surprise to enliven her readers with writing that simulates the act of being- in- thought. In this way, the ability to precisely internalize authorial intent from a writer in this way, offers the potential to sharpen levels of communicative purpose within a live performance.

Acting theorist, Rhonda Blair, applies neuro-scientific principles about the structures of consciousness to her text-based rehearsal processes. These principles reinforce the importance of the strategy outlined above in which the speaker is invited to make specific personal and structural links between their own mental image and the word to be uttered:

Clarity of language is crucial, for it is a direct reflection of clarity in relationship to image and action. If the language changes or is unclear, then the image changes or is unclear; and this manifests itself in changes or lack of clarity in the action, which is an outgrowth of and response to the imagination. (Blair 2008, 90)

Blair notes how an interconnection of strategies, involving word and image, can both have a positive effect on audience attention and contribute to the professional success of the actors involved. (Blair 2008, 91) Her findings support my own reflections on the PaR events discussed here, and further underline the rewards of teasing out the precise interconnections between new theories, as they arise out of other disciplines, and voice practice. In this interplay between the verse forms as constructed by the author, their interpretation in the mind and body of the speaker and their perception by the interlocutor or audience, it is suggested that the plurality of meanings circulated adds to the richness between speaker and listener

in the moment of live communication.

### **The Mentorship**

Professional British verse reader, Mulcahy, occupied a unique role in the UK cultural context, between the early 1960's until her death in 2012, in that she was able to build a career exclusively based upon the performance of extant verse. The immersion in the performative possibilities of the verse line in the English poetic canon provided Mulcahy with a finely honed attunement to the communication of verse. Her keen appreciation of the nuances of the English verse line, coupled with her understanding of an audience's capacity to receive the spoken word, figured prominently in our coaching relationship. I accepted this experience and acceded to her authority. In turn, I posited and negotiated meanings where I wanted them to be incorporated into my reading. This set three points of reference in motion at any one time, between the coach, the speaker and the author and generated a productive working dialectic.

Ms Mulcahy's practice belongs under the umbrella of the ethos in the UK actor training conservatoires, referred to earlier, exemplified in the work of teachers like Pursey,<sup>3</sup> and traceable to the turn of the twentieth century and earlier. This ethos, recognizable as a series of vocal exhortations, provocations and exercises on the part of the tutor or coach, has been formulated in order to enable the speaker to take the verse text from the page and to place it within their own psychophysical persona for the purposes of live communication.

In coaching my own performance of Bishop in May 2010, Mulcahy deployed a range of strategies to encourage comprehension for the listener. This was based upon an interpretation of the evidences from the page arrived at between ourselves. It is important to underline, again, that whilst Mulcahy retained the lead, in terms of guiding the spoken delivery, the agreement about meaning was fluidly negotiated between speaker and coach. Initial phrases of guidance such as "surprise yourself with the poem" and "don't *know* too much" were mixed with very specific notes about allowing the grammar of the poem to work, about trusting the variety of rhythm contained within the syntax, and about "being kinder with cadences as a story-teller would..."(Mulcahy, May 2012).

The decision to embark on the work with Mulcahy was informed by the

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<sup>3</sup> I will not detail the work of Elizabeth Pursey, as already mentioned, other than to reiterate her influence as voice mentor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.



reflective pedagogy model represented in “action research”.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to have first hand experience at the receiving end of a process, in order to use it to develop my practice as a verse speaker and to reflect it back through my teaching. Although it proved no simple matter to achieve the desired results, it highlighted the importance of the objective external eye/ear within the conservatoire’s dialogical verse training model.

Bishop’s poem *The Moose* featured in all three research events referenced in this paper. Mulcahy had never read or coached Bishop’s work, so this poem provided a perfect coincidence of mutual interest. Not only was the poem one of Bishop’s best-known works, and therefore of interest to Mulcahy, but the specificity of its travel narrative and finely drawn sense of place meant it had long been a personal favorite.

### **The Coaching Process**

In May 2010, Mulcahy agreed to take on a role as my coach and work started with an initial read through of *The Moose*. Halting me mid-way through the first stanza, I was alerted to a stress pattern that confused the narrative rhythm. Her subsequent critique focused upon several other similar vocal issues in relation to the obfuscation of narrative content. This resulted in a further dissection of the patterning that had rendered obsolete important content carrying words. Her feedback suggested there was an under-nuanced vocal specificity on certain key words. This critique resulted in a close re-working of the falling vocal inflections and the pace of utterance. Both patterns, she felt, originated out of my own speech habit, rather than the poet’s actual line, and thereby blocked an effective realization of the poem as written.

Mulcahy drew attention to the words in the text that were available to stimulate the visual cortex of the listener, matching Blair’s view, verified by neuroscience, about the importance of the connection between image and the word. The main coaching strategy involved an examination of the structural evidences of the line, and a verification of each image/word in the speaker’s mind’s eye. One of the main aims was to ensure that there were no dominating personalized inflections imposed from outside the frame of the poem. By so doing, she reinforced one of the guiding tenets at the heart of voice training in the UK for over a century: the text as the primary source of evidence for the speaker.

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<sup>4</sup> Action research is a cyclical model of research most frequently connected to the reflection upon and development of teaching processes in the classroom or, in this case, studio.

Mulcahy asked that I shape a sequence of poems in order for the audience to both appreciate that it was comprised of Bishop's work (and not my own) and that I was responsible for voicing the work (and was not in 'disguise' as the poet). She alluded to this as a subtle process of masking the artificiality of the event so that the word could be heard as if freshly minted from the voice of the speaker and yet also be recognized as the work of an author not present in the room; an acknowledgment of the performer's paradox in the sense of being there as self but also not being there in order to allow the author to be "as if" heard.

As the process unfolded, I annotated my script with matters of pace shifts and pauses in consideration of the listener capacity to hear and digest. Along with the request to internalize these notes, I was encouraged to take on an immersive approach to each poem and to slowly integrate other work from Bishop's oeuvre in order to fully represent the range of her material.

As the work developed, ways were suggested to intensify my connection with the images in the poem in relation to Mulcahy's capacity to hear/see them. This involved sharpening my visualization of the bus journey at the heart of the poem, metaphorically travelling on it, allowing the pace of the voice to reflect the time taken by the events described. Indeed, in a conversation two years later in September 2012, Mulcahy reminded me that such was the success of my evocation of the bus, when I spoke the poem to her again, my voice took her straight to her mind's eye view of the bus (Mulcahy September, 2012). Whilst we can never be sure this was Bishop's bus, it was one that we both agreed upon based on the evidences carefully constructed from the page. This process of refining our "agreement" based on the images from the evidences on the page, underpinned many of the subsequent exchanges we had during the remainder of the working process.

A third of the way through the poem, the landscape of the bus journey shifts and I was urged to reflect the changes. As the "fog" closed in, she wanted the fog to be inflected more precisely and the "lupins" to be "as if" upright in the voice. The notion of visualizing the architecture of a scene and the plasticity of the objects depicted, so as to be imprinted on the voice, was something that stayed uppermost as a principle throughout:

Goodbye to the elms,/ to the farm, to the dog./ The bus starts. The  
light/ grows richer; the fog,/ shifting, salty thin,/ comes closing in./  
Its cold, round crystals/ form and slide and settle/ in the white hens'  
feathers,/ in grey glazed cabbages,/ on the cabbage roses/ and lupins  
like apostles- (Bishop 2004, 170)

Mulcahy insisted that a “tablecloth” be visualized in the act of being shaken, some “rubber boots” better identified, the woman who “regards us amicably” to be more distinctive and, as the “passengers lie back,” she asked me metaphorically to lean into the words; with the aim that the patina made by the image on the voice would guide the listener to the fullest sensation of the action related.

The process of visualization will, of course, be familiar to most voice and actor trainers. An account of the process is less familiar, however, and the analysis afforded by action research forms part of the relevant ‘evidence’ for the discussion in this paper. The mentee position gave me the first hand opportunity to observe the importance of the balance of trust in the voice studio in which the word is ‘as if’ conducted by the coach but also ‘discovered’ by the student. It also demonstrated that acceding to the authority of the coach isn’t the same thing as collusion with authorial ‘paternity’ and that they remain two distinct entities. In addition, it confirmed Blair’s point about the exciting possibilities that can be enabled in performance once the coaching relationship acknowledges a full spectrum of “... sensory, kinesthetic, kinesic, and proprioceptive processes” (2008, 54).

Throughout, Mulcahy stressed the importance of the kinesic, sensory and temporal properties of the language:

The passengers lie back./ Snores. Some long sighs./ A dreamy  
divagation/ begins in the night,/ a gentle auditory,/ slow  
hallucination... (Bishop 2004, 171)

Words such as “hallucination” were lingered over in order to better evoke the poem’s quality on the threshold between the ‘civilized’ and the primitive. Important too, was the build of pace for the poem’s climax, marked by the arrival of the Moose. Mulcahy recommended that I “experience” the event as “drama” and attend to the sensory details in the shifts between “acrid smells,” “gasoline,” “tarmac”, surrounding the appearance of the creature:

...by craning backward,/ the moose can be seen/ on the moonlit  
macadam;/ then there’s a dim/ smell of moose, an acrid/ smell of  
gasoline. (Bishop 2004, 173)

Mulcahy further suggested that a fresh intake of breath would allow the shift in the narrative to be better communicated and also preserve the

exact structure of the poem so that it could be more fully anticipated by the listener. This instruction also served as an opportunity to break free from any externalized reverence for the poem remaining from previous analysis and allowed me fully to inhabit the poem according to a strict word-by-word analysis from the page.

Important in the process was the memorization of the poems. Mulcahy often spoke about the ways in which the poems she had stored and committed to memory had exerted their continuing influence. I undertook the memorization of three of Bishop's key poems, as the basis of my programme, and was struck by the way this immersion provided an enhanced sensation of speaker-poem-poet inter-subjectivity.

We turned, next, to another long poem by Bishop, *Crusoe In England*, in order to build on the established working process. In this work, Mulcahy's coaching notes ensured that the poem was served by a conversational, matter-of-fact tone on the line in keeping with the narrative style of the poem. She asked that I also subtly incorporate a mix of vocal registers, (as in tonal range) in order to better guide the poetic form towards a performance and to allow the poem to operate at the level of the invitation made from its own field of composition.

Overall, my delivery at these events aimed to avoid the declamatory so that the verse would sound close to 'ordinary' conversation. I felt this would both make the poems accessible and vivify the readings such that they would correspond to speech realities without stylistic 'ornamentation'.

The audiences (both at the Song/Art day and the Sharpham event) conceivably missed the excitement of a dramatic performance because of the value placed on conversational engagement. I felt, however, that this would allow the structural life of the poems to speak more readily to the audience and, thereby, recompense them for any loss of entertainment value that might have been supplied by a more stylized reading.

A measure of success in this regard can be noted in a letter sent to me after I had undertaken a rehearsal performance to the University of the Third Age poetry group in Brighton under Mulcahy's guidance. In a letter written on October 6th 2010, she wrote:

I was quite thrilled with how the poems have grown since I last heard them- and especially the quiet contrast between *The Moose* and *Crusoe in England* - I felt you caught the CHARACTER (sic) in the latter so well- also the general air of alienation of the poet from the

events- the keen observation and involvement and yet preserving the "space" between "poem" and "listener" (sic)- not quite sure what I mean here but know I was enchanted by your quiet, yet controlled delivery of the words...(Mulcahy 2010)

Later in the same letter, Mulcahy offered a useful critique stemming directly from the responses of her poetry group after the performance:

...Your audience particularly noted the conversation in the bus...and they loved your pauses. If I had any criticism at all I would only agree and welcome even more thoughtful pauses where the stanzas divide? I was following the text so cheating a bit and hope I didn't disturb you rustling the pages? (Mulcahy 2010)

### **Analysis of the Coaching relationship**

The responses from the coach and the audience, noted above, indicate a further measure of the 'success' of this work. The synthesis of close textual readings, coach and mentee discussion about verse structure and the required vocal calibration, thereby demonstrated their capacity to foster a dynamic embodiment of the poem. Whilst it is true that we can never fully 'know' how a poem will be heard, the coaching relationship evidently suggests that it can predict many of the terms upon which receptivity will operate.

Reflection upon the coaching relationship has also shown that the study of the poetics of compressed thoughts, images and emotions on the verse line provides another function in voice training. Firstly, the field of vision of the poem, as it is different from one's own, allows for a sharpening of the ability to make precise decisions about the content of language forms, as we have shown. Secondly, the finely worked composition of verse, within which the human psyche is perceived, offers other ways of understanding individuality as constructed from a repository of multiple meanings, including the political, the social, the symbolic and the personal. This provides the means by which the student can begin to make a distinction between their own vocal and psychological patterns as opposed to those suggested by the authorial structures on the page. It also gives the trainee an educational opportunity to engage with the compositional example of a range of authors, in or out of the 'canon' and a dialogical position from which to respond and develop the voice in relation to the receptivity of the other, in some cases represented by the author and in others, the vocal coach.

## **Critical perspectives and their impact on voice training**

In an essay published in 1970, Barthes examined a number of approaches to the word laid out in Massin's encyclopedia *Letter and Image*. By so doing, Barthes provided a number of conceptual options for the voice practitioner. He challenged some of the "truths" in textual hermeneutics with the suggestion that the text as content and as a visual mark is more arbitrary than it is revelatory. It is this aspect that can breathe new life into the protocols of the voice studio:

...as one leafs through these hundreds of figured letters produced by every century, from the medieval copyists' workshops to the Beatles' Yellow Submarine, it is quite clear that the letter is not the sound; all linguists derives language from speech, of which it declares writing to be merely a particular disposition; Massin's book protests: the letter's coming and becoming (its source and its perpetual goal) are independent of the phoneme. (p99 *The Spirit of the Letter* in Roland Barthes *The Responsibility of Forms* 1991 Berkeley: The University of California Press)

As we have shown, conservatoire training utilizes the word as part of its concern with the communicable "truth". The chain of events from thought to sound to utterance to the letter is thought of as a seamless process. Barthes, however, challenges this and reveals that the word as letter is:

" Only a paradigmatic, arbitrary bridgehead, since discourse must begin...As Massin keeps telling us by his images, they are only floating chains of signifiers which pass and intersect each other – all logic is exhausted by it:" (ibid p101).

The implications of this argument are that the text reveals an author who is inescapably locked in a system of linguistic constructs, bearing no relationship to generalizations about states of mind. This holds sway in a critical context but is not always applicable in a training context for reasons that we will go on to discuss.

I agree with Barthes about the importance of examining author and text in relation to a range of critical standpoints. However, as we have already shown, text within voice training has another purpose, has long been misunderstood and is long overdue for a new rationale. Far from suggesting that extant 'authored' verse text provides exemplary material by

which an individual can construct one ‘truth’, it is utilized to explore multiple “truths”; the analysis and speaking of verse, in this way, provides a vital starting point between teacher and student for work on the transformational demands in specified performance contexts. Here again, we see the importance of the dialogical relationship in the studio wherein “truth’s” are constructed via a process of engagement. Far from ‘essentialism’, then, this work thrives on the idea of the active construction and relational engagement of any given text.

It is true there are strong imperatives within this interpretative approach that defer to the word on the page. This is not always popular, as suggested above, amongst those who adopt a critical approach in order to expose long held power constructs in which exclusions and privileges are exercised and maintained by means of language. In the interests of democratizing the processes of creative expression, many contemporary artists work, instead, to create empowering structures as opposed to perceived hieratic or elitist ones. In this way, students are enabled simultaneously to manage the creative process of their own presence in the work and to also deconstruct the obscured power structures already present in the act of interpreting textual givens.

Mulcahy’s coaching approach, as we have seen, operated along the lines of close textual readings that placed the author firmly in the centre, interspersed with wider philosophical discussion. It was via this process that mutual agreement was reached about both authorial intention and the style of the readings. It drew upon her previous experiences of both readings and authors – as canonically familiar- and rarely deviated from the words on the page. In this sense, Mulcahy supported the ‘privileged’ position of the author; in addition, however, as a result of the way in which the author and text rekindled the mind’s eye of the coach herself, there was a palpable “electric” charge of recognition in the working of the word -in – life again. Whilst Mulachy had no previous knowledge of Bishop, the author’s textual givens provided an interpretive key and determined a relationship to the author that she ‘wished into being’. In this latter sense, it is argued that the author is superseded by the in-the –moment coaching relationship and thereby creates a new inter-subjectively authored text.

### **Alternative Approaches to Text**

Jerome Fletcher, Associate Professor of Performance Writing at University College Falmouth, works with textual material in way reminiscent of Barthes’ critical discourse about the deconstruction of the text. Through the digital manipulation of the word on the screen, he raises the prospect

of generating a different sense of empowered artistry for the activator. Mixing random chance and constructed changes, Fletcher entertains a range of opportunities for different kinds of textual readings in which the reader is encouraged to participate in its active recreation. The following excerpt from an abstract of a conference at which Fletcher was present indicates the breadth of the project:

While continuing the investigation of live performance, we will be seeking to broaden the scope to include; interactivity, the performative gesture of the hand and fingers (digital text) on the interface, the performativity of language itself on the screen, social performance... we will also be investigating how they interact and collaborate with each other. (Quote taken from description of the ELCMCIP Seminar on digital textuality with/in Performance held between May 3-4 2012 at the Arnolifini in Bristol

In the interpretive tradition within the acting conservatoires this might be regarded as an egotistical seizing of the word that is not theirs to rearrange, but in another context it can be clearly considered a refreshing and radical re-working.

Canadian artist, writer and maker of non-linear hypermedia narratives, J.R Carpenter, similarly, produces digital texts from an interweaving of conceptual ideas drawn from brief extracts of existing writing– a practice that, again, shifts the authority away from the author and on to the manipulator. Her selection of just one line from Bishop’s poem *The End of March*, set against other kinds of utterances, certainly provides a stimulating challenge to the idea that the text must remain whole in order for the listener to grasp its intent:

The act of writing translates aural, physical, mental and digital processes into marks, actions, utterances and speech-acts. The intelligibility of that which is written is intertwined with both the context of its production and of its consumption...(Writing Coastlines: The Operation of Estuaries, Islands and Beaches as Liminal Spaces in the Writings of Elizabeth Bishop presented at “It must be Nova Scotia: Negotiating Place in the Writings of Elizabeth Bishop” University of King’s College Halifax, NS Canada 9-12 June 2011).

This position, linking analysis of content, the act of writing itself and the



embodied process of reading, challenges the conservatoire values (in which the whole textual content is regarded as the only repository of meaning). It could be usefully posited as part of alternative improvisational studio approaches in which the student is invited to re-author any given extant verse text in relation to a different set of performative strategies. Here Carpenter details some of the work she undertook on one of Bishop's poems "The End of March":

Elizabeth Bishop is writing about coastlines, in a literary sense. But she is also writing coastlines in a performative sense. The act of textually and bodily writing and rewriting lines in and of the liminal space hovering between solid and liquid, dry and wet, land and sea, and fresh and salt demarcates the struggle to articulate the yet more tenuous threshold between home and away (ibid p8).

As we can see, this poses an interesting challenge to the contemporary interpreter of the text who believes in an exclusively 'literary' determination of the value of each word; it asks of this process whether rendering the work whole gets closer to a truthful interpretation of the author's compositional intentions, or just reflects an outmoded belief in the 'grand narrative' tradition that could do with refreshing and updating?

There are a multitude of possible responses to such questions and the answers are shaped, to a partial extent, by the nature of the context in which the verse work is situated, and for whom it is intended. As Fiona Sampson, poet and ex-editor of *Poetry Review*, commented after the Bishop research day performance: "It's not purely performance, or musicality, we're talking about after all, but the *voicedness* of verse" (Sampson 2011). This new coinage from Sampson has implications for both performative and compositional contexts in which the pre-determined word and the act of making it sonically present are placed in a more conscious relationship to each other.

These are strategies that will sit well alongside those within the coaching model. As noted above, the links they make between structured composition, embodied composition, as effected between self and author, and the voice in space as in a form of sonic writing, comes close to realizing Sampson's 'voicedness'.

## **A Programme of Verse**

Mulcahy's other main role, as already noted, was to advise on all the elements in the delivery of a programme of verse. Based upon the principle

that the brevity of poems (in the main) offers an audience very little time in which to adjust to their compressed cadences, she recommended a contextualization prior to each reading. She suggested that brief but pertinent introductions would usefully situate and focus the act of listening.

In response to this, I sought out biographical material on Bishop's life to both anchor me in the ambience of her compositional background and to provide additional auditory fixtures for the audience. This device provided an immediate problem at a philosophical level, however, since Elizabeth Bishop fought hard to keep the specificities of her biography out of the public eye. The contemporary appetite for biography in the way it intrudes on the art produced can often distract and potentially undermine the credibility of the writer. Bishop was adamant that her work should be considered of more importance than her life. So why put her story in at all?

Upon reflection, the biographical research provided a tool for the enrichment of audience receptivity. The communication of biography as a form of narrative sign posting, pointed the listener towards a contextualization of 'meanings' in the poems and appeared to allow them to be freer to listen. The narration, in this way, provided a frame for the audience; a way to invite close attention and offer focus where there is often a problem in "settling" the ear to the task of listening against the promises of the dominance of visual stimuli. According to Ms Mulcahy, the performer of verse needs to do all they can to fully embody the work so that the listener will be guided to the purpose of *listening*, particularly as "nobody listens to the first items" since the audience is usually too busy *watching*. Similarly, she pointed out, the internal "noise" of an audience may be too loud at the beginning of a performance and will need to be quieted by the speaker (Mulchay September 2012).

These latter observations takes us back to our discussion about the coaching relationship in the voice studio and adds in another layer about the necessity of a flexible nuancing of author, verse reader and language in order to better facilitate listener reception.

## **The life of the Poet**

Debate about the relationship between an author's life and their art abound in the academy. Whilst fully endorsing Bishop's choice of privacy, I chose to *come out* on her behalf and highlight a number of the startling biographical details that contributed to the poetics of 'surprise' referred to

earlier in this paper.

The facts of Bishop's life both compelled and appalled and it seemed not unreasonable to suppose that in some way they would have been formational to her poetics. The choice to narrate them, however, clearly situated my performance in a culture of biography and realism over the deconstructions of artist's like JR Carpenter who cast the word adrift from the author toward the realm of individual choice.

Upon reflection, it is clear that my own auto ethnographic interests led to my use of the former strategy thus highlighting the sense that the lesbian story in Bishop is, in part, my own and that re-telling Bishop's story was a way of imbricating my story a-slant in Bishop's own.

Bishop was born on February 9<sup>th</sup> 1911 in a house on Main Street, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA, to William Thomas Bishop, of Worcester, and Gertrude May Bulmer of Great Village, Nova Scotia. At eight months old, on October 13<sup>th</sup>, Elizabeth's father died of Bright's disease. In a state of extreme distress, her widowed mother took herself and Elizabeth to live with aunts in Boston, and then in 1915, they moved up to Great Village, Nova Scotia, to be with Elizabeth's maternal grandparents. Following a mental breakdown, in part precipitated by the sudden loss of her husband, Elizabeth's mother was admitted to the state sanatorium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, leaving Elizabeth alone with her grandparents. This was the last time she ever saw her mother alive.

Two years later, Elizabeth was, in her own words, "kidnapped" by her paternal grandparents who had been "horrified to see the only child of their eldest son running about the village in bare feet, eating at the table with the grown-ups and drinking tea" (Bishop 2008, 906). They took her back to the States.

I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, ...(Bishop 2008, 413)

At the Institute for Musical Research (IMR) post performance discussion in May 2011, I asked the audience to reflect on their listening process both with regard to Bishop's highly structured poetic content and to the vernacular in the autobiographical narrative indicated above. I asked them to consider whether they were more attuned to the writer's world or to the

verse? There was little direct response to the questions in the feedback that followed the performance, due, again, to limited time limitations. One audience member, however, offered thanks for the opportunity to learn about Bishop the poet and another, an interest in my “natural” approach to the verse since it seemed so unlike a *performance*. I surmised, too, from the general comments overall, that further guidance about ways in which to listen to the tight weave of voices, so as to better distinguish between narrator, poet’s voice, and the intra- poem voices, would have been appreciated.

In the IMR performance, my narration included aspects of information about Bishop’s life in the fall of 1942 in New York. This was when she was introduced to Maria Carlota Costelat de Macedo Soares (nicknamed Lota), a Brazilian woman of aristocratic background, who had been travelling with her American companion dancer Mary Morse, who, in turn, was an acquaintance of Bishop’s. The two of them invited Bishop to visit them in Brazil. She first travelled there in 1951 but cancelled a planned trip to the Straits of Magellan “because of a violent allergic reaction to the fruit of the cashew” (Bishop 2008, 911). Lota nursed Bishop back to health and the two women eventually fell in love. This relationship marked the beginning of Elizabeth’s life outside the US and it was to continue for the subsequent sixteen years completely out of the public eye.

The research revealed that Bishop’s emotional dramas, including travel accidents, health traumas, addiction, concealed lesbian identity and so on, needed sensitive handling in order not to be gratuitously exploited. It became important, as well, not to disempower Bishop as a woman of her own making, even though she often spoke with a certain passivity in relation to her destiny, in which life events seemingly just “happened” upon her. Her adoption of a fatalistic philosophy, was, conceivably, a coping mechanism in the face of so many early life traumas over which she had no control: “I never meant to go to Brazil. I never meant doing any of these things. I’m afraid everything has just happened” (Monteiro 1996, xiii). As a re-reader of her work, with a strong connection to Bishop’s sexual identity, I also took particular steps not to overstate the ‘story’ of her life (with which I strongly identified), in the interests of allowing the poetic work to speak for itself, whilst simultaneously positioning a few key points as a ‘soft’ act of reparation for the life I felt she had chosen not to live.

It was crucial to the design of the programme overall, that I anticipated audience receptivity to Bishop’s sensitive biographical material and considered their cultural predilections for the autobiographical over the poetic, particularly if the sensational elements were at risk of dominating

the verse itself.<sup>5</sup>

Bishop's belief in the ability of a poem to generate surprise and communicate aliveness in the reader, referred to earlier in the paper, led me to find appropriate ways of incorporating Bishop's fatalistic philosophy, as well as her sensational life, into the vocal and dramaturgical delivery of the programme. It also led to further reflection about the ways in which her work –perhaps informed by biography –embodies something quintessentially important about the importance of fostering present tense *aliveness* in the voice for performance.

The following examples of Bishop's verse were selected for my programme and are discussed below. The process of work took place without Mulcahy as coach but in light of the work we had already begun. It revealed more about the ways of interweaving listener attentiveness to the prose forms, such as biography, over the verse forms themselves, mentioned above, and gave me a greater opportunity to define the work outside the relational coach/student dynamic.

It became clear that utilizing biography in a seductive and illusory way, as if holding the promise of a truthful revelation of the subject, would only mask other more relevant "truths" in the verse. On the other hand, when positioned in the light of relevant social and political realities, the biographical material became a useful framing device in which factual and symbolic material could work with each other to offer multiple sources of meaning.

Finally, I will discuss the ways in which Bishop's poems provided valuable expressive material for the voice precisely because they were composed with the expressed intention of re-activating lived-in-the-moment sensations.

The first poem is "The Armadillo." This evocation of a phenomenon observed in the night sky of the southern hemisphere, directly draws upon Bishop's Brazilian experiences. The poem opens with a bold, clear statement of place and action in which the atmosphere is evocative of both multiple sensations of vulnerability, both in the events described and in the stylistic *voice* of the poem. This combination has a particular relevance,

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to reflect that I undertook much of this work outside the coaching relationship in order to allow my own experience and thoughts about sexual identity to circulate more freely without the necessity of translating or explaining my own position to Mulcahy.

again, to the needs of the voice student who seeks to rationalize the images of action in their mind's eye with the possibility of experiencing the internal sensations hinted at beyond the boundaries of the *literal* text:

This is the time of year/ when almost every night/ the frail, illegal fire balloons appear. /Climbing the mountain height/ rising toward a saint still honored in these parts, / the paper chambers flush and fill with light/ that comes and goes, like hearts. (Bishop 2004, 103)

The opening eight short lines, with their simple rhyme scheme, catch the listener/reader's attention with its conversational vernacular and a number of light-infused *transformational* conceits. Speaker embodiment of this information, as fostered in the studio coaching relationship, encourages the listener to make choices not only about the reconstruction of the images and events but also the emotions evoked by the conceits.

This process of speaker embodiment, as we have seen, owes much to Mulcahy's coaching method in which the perceptions of both speaker and listener are simultaneously targeted. In the uncontrollable space of a "live" reading, involving a number of variables, I testified to the fact that these strategies, supported by solid preparatory work, were able to draw attention to a word –by- word specificity for the listener.

In the poem *The End of March*, the ordinariness of a beach in winter becomes, in Bishop's hands, a place of drama involving the unexpected personification of beach detritus amidst the longings of one of the walkers for an unattainable destination. It begins on a long stretch of windy sand with a protagonist musing about a much desired beach house:

Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed/ a track of big dog-prints (so big/ they were more like lion-prints). / Then we came on lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string, / looping up to the tide-line, down to the water, / over and over. Finally, they did end:/ a thick white snarl, man-size, awash, / rising on every wave, a sodden ghost, / falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost.../ A kite string? – But no kite. (Bishop 2004, 179)

Bishop's conceits of "surprise" – the string from the missing kite –the ghostly hand– the unknown inhabitants of the unreachable beach dwelling –fantasies about the owner of the dog prints in the sand– all lead us to think further about the ways in which such language operates upon its

listeners. Seemingly a little above the hub bub of the everyday, but not so far away as to be rarified beyond belief, language such as this carries the focused energy of drama within the surrounds of highly constructed realism. The “surprise” lies in the way the combination of content, rhythm, timing and sound, alerts the listener to a different kind of attention than that required by narrative or conversation. This contract between speaker and listener in a performative context asks that the subtle offerings of the verse line be received, as already outlined, in ways that are beyond the purely informational and hint at a more symbolic level of reception.

Bishop’s poetics, noted for the detail in the accuracy of her images, allow the voice student to develop a congruency with the literal word as well as an appreciation of the non-literal possibilities within which nothing can be *known* for certain; that *space* behind the words. The juxtaposition of the idea that the beach is visually realizable, the beach dwelling a mystery and the owner of the footsteps unknowable, makes the work appropriate for the voice student who needs to stay alert to the sound/thought spectrum suggested in any single utterance. It, additionally, makes Bishop an excellent poet for the contemporary voice practitioner who is required to embrace levels of verisimilitude within the more traditional mimetic voice methods that are linked to conscious cognitive functioning.

Bishop poetics operate to mirror the mind in the act of cognition. She attributes this to a treatise on seventeenth century prose in which writers of sermons, such as John Donne, attempted to demonstrate the mind in a state of action, rather than in repose, with the use of the grammatical present tense: “Switching tenses always gives effects of depth, space, foreground, background and so on” (Monteiro 1996, xiii). Again, this quality of an active presence of mind in her work makes it the perfect compliment to the task of a live voicing.

## **Conclusions:**

These reflections about the coach/ student relationship in the study of verse text within UK conservatoire voice training have indicated a number of possible directions for future work. In examining Bishop’s verse as exhibit, as performance material and as a pedagogical tool for the voice practitioner within actor training, I have shown some of the ways in which critical theory in the main instance and neuroscience in a more marginal sense can impact upon and widen the ways in which such working processes can be engaged with. I have also begun to show some of the ways in which these processes can develop *progressively* in relation to the impact of these critical and scientific positions.

The account of two Elizabeth Bishop verse speaking events in which listener/spectators were invited to consider a number of auditory options, including the direct voice from Bishop's correspondence, third party accounts from selective biography and the poems themselves, has offered, in terms of plurality, the beginning of a new set of choices for both the speaker and the listener. They move us towards the consideration of a repositioning of the traditionally passive audience experience, now customarily challenged in a number of contemporary theatre and performance approaches, and posit ways of working verse text both with and without an absolute attention to the 'author'. They also raise the importance of looking back at the ways in which studio relationships in a previous historical period left the author 'unchallenged' but simultaneously offered useful ways in which to refine the voicing of authored work. This has particular relevance for a contemporary audience in the light of the increasing domination of visual spectatorship.

These kinds of approaches taken together have the potential, as well, to develop studio work on text in a number of new directions. Some of them can take a cue from the "new" digital experiments with text, some of them can be informed by discussions about the necessity for the visual and the auditory to work in tandem better to facilitate the listener's understanding and some of it can be informed by the wider discussions taking place about performance as research where questions about the voice form the substantive focus of the enquiry. Whilst listener comprehension can never be assured, it is suggested that the process of creating a range of premeditated conditions on the part of the verse speaker – that "voicedness" spoken of earlier – will enable a greater range of productive listener possibilities and draw closer attention to the ways in which the voice is a constantly evolving dialogical transmitter of messaging possibilities between the individual and the listener.

Bishop's work also reminds us, in particular, of the necessity of focusing on the specificity of the voice structured by each poet in the choices they designated to the page and of the benefits to a student in being able to fully appreciate the style, structure and content of those choices in order to take both the training voice student and the listener to sharper levels of attentiveness.

Whilst this task neatly corresponds to many of the existing holistic philosophies within voice training, the changing perspectives with regard to the text that are offered in digital re-workings, exhibiting both text and author, and mixing the register of voices within a performance, as I have



suggested, can all offer insights that add to existing approaches, and raise new questions about the task of connecting speakers to the word as well as to audiences.

The mentorship with Mulcahy raised a number of important questions about the importance of developing different kinds of embodied strategies for students who have no previous access to a literary background and for whom the relationship in the 'master' teacher dynamic might be counter productive in terms of their own particular teaching and learning preference. It also confirmed the importance of generating speaker clarity via processes in which time is taken and detailed attention is paid to the language construction on the page. The work also provided a valuable embodied reminder of the importance of the craft of the professional voice speaker and how, when served by transparent intention, it can enhance listener engagement.

The very concept of an individual's connection with the text in voice training is one, as I have suggested, long overdue for re-evaluation, particularly in the light of more recent approaches to words, performance and subjectivity in which the audience is invited to explicitly engage in creating their own text. It is hoped that the evidences provided in this paper will form part of an on-going examination about the ways in which changing concepts of authorship, and audience receptivity can inform the voice methods in the contemporary training studio. Along with the traditional voice coaching approach outlined above, they can make a valuable contribution to the process of the refinement of the auditory message in live performance and of a deepening of the understanding of the processes of vocal communication that occur in the live performance of poetic text within the conservatoire and beyond.

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