

GETTING PLAYED

Peter Munro

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

Richard Kenney

Linda Bierds

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

©Copyright 2024

Peter Munro

University of Washington

Abstract

GETTING PLAYED

Peter Munro

Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Richard Kenney

Department of English

Abstract

This essay explores a concept called the taskscape, employed in anthropology and archaeology, and suggests a model for a poetry taskscape. The taskscape is a perspective on human social systems as components of larger, physical systems that are dynamic rather than fixed.

Constituents of taskscapes, both human and nonhuman, are shaped by the taskscape and contribute to shaping the taskscape. The general taskscape is briefly reviewed, a model for a specific poetry taskscape is proposed, and implications for future work are made clear. The tasks of performing a poem and hearing a poem are given particular focus.

Introduction

A small cobble fills your palm. The stone, about the size of two fists pressed together, weighs a little more than you would care to hold aloft for very long. For the moment, though, this rock is easy to heft. Pressure, heat, subduction, sedimentation, uplift, and erosion, all paced over many millions of years, have formed, then weathered, this bit of planet to a vaguely disk shape, rounded smooth on all axes, x, y, and z. Your job is to turn this cobble into a hand axe, soon.

The moment approaches when you and others from your band will form a hunting party. You will walk out into the world to kill or, just as likely, steal the kills of lions. With luck, and if you have sung the sacred songs correctly, you and your kin will return dragging a carcass. Butchery will commence. This cobble, sun-warmed in your palm, must be fashioned to a hand axe before your band hauls home the meat.

Scattered across this pond-shaped basin, everyone is at work. Your oldest uncle squats close enough for you to hear his breath. Grunting and clicking not quite rhythmically, he chips his rock to shape. A woman picks through more cobbles a few meters down to where the creek bed runs with dust, choked in this season of heat. From where you perch on your heels, you keep your eye on her shape as she culls. You hope she has chosen her spot so you can watch her. Your second-oldest uncle's mate, her baby wrapped to her breast, works beside the young woman you love. The two giggle and nudge, never or maybe glancing your way. Your oldest uncle's best friend knaps on the other side of the creek bed, chipping his own stone device into existence. Suddenly he jumps up and dances, gripping his left thumb in his right fist, loudly tolling, voicing what would eventually evolve into internationally certified utterances of

disapproval, phrases and sounds older than nation, old as the hills. The two women giggle again, quietly, careful not to look directly at his dance.

Your sister's third oldest boy peers at the stone in your hands, rapt as he assesses the latent axe, intent to find a path to the tool. He leans against your arm as he studies. When he leans away, the sweat where your skins met dries quickly under the morning sun. You turn the cobble over, shifting it from palm to palm. Your nephew holds his own stone, an old hand axe he'd found the day before, its edge nicked to uselessness and discarded by some nameless predecessor at this tool-making site. Following your motion with the cobble, he turns his recovered axe, examining its systematic fracturing, seeking a map to the next hand axe. Then he touches a forefinger to the spot on your cobble that he thinks is right for an initial strike. Good. He gets it. You hand him your stone.

Your troupe has been coming to this site for centuries. People, perhaps two species of people if not three, may have intermittently occupied this site for millennia. Humans have stationed themselves at such sites for hundreds of thousands of years, for far longer than your species has existed. And in a matter of a mere ten or twenty centuries, a god will speak from a nearby burning bush and the listener to that voice will tell the story until the tribe writes it down. And in the writing, all the stories told to the night in boredom and fear from around small, open fires will begin to metamorphose toward stability.

Imagine that you care nothing of such expanses of time, such speciation of being, such speciation of tool, such speciation of story. Imagine that, to your understanding, this site has always been here, as it is now, a seasonal scene of rock, of sculpted tool-shapes, and of carcasses hacked and shared out among kin and ally. Imagine that you show your sister's boy how to strike the spot he had just touched.

This pond-shaped basin and all that occupy it, animate and inanimate, human and not-human, together manifest a system that anthropologists and archaeologists call a taskscape (Ingold, 1993[2000]; Gruppuso and Whitehouse, 2020; Rajala and Mills, 2017). The leanest definition of taskscape is simply a landscape that is a complex of dynamic processes and operates through time. This definition leaves much to unpack. Typically, taskscapes include people and social systems. The constituents of a taskscape are considered to be dwellers, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. All the dwellers, by their activities, shape the taskscape and are also shaped by the taskscape. Observers of a taskscape cannot be outside of the taskscape and, thus, also shape the taskscape and are themselves shaped by it. In what follows, I will attempt to frame several poetic endeavors in a taskscape perspective. I believe a poet may find some usefulness in such a framing. However, my real motivation is that there is something in the notion of taskscape that makes me happy. In this essay I try to track down an explanation for my happiness.

In the course of that tracking, I will examine the taskscape as defined by anthropologists and archaeologists, with attention to what those scholars consider activities in a taskscape. Following their model, I try to identify a set of activities performed by dwellers in a poetry taskscape. I will pay particular attention to ways the taskscape has been considered by students of the evolution of language and music. After suggesting a few attributes of a taskscape model for poetry, I will discuss three specific tasks as a way of developing that model in the abstract; those tasks are making, performing, and hearing a poem.

The poem as an artifact of a taskscape will be compared to notions of the poem as a device (Larkin, 1984) or contraption (Auden, 1962). The task of making a hand axe is distinct from the task of using a hand axe to butcher a kill. Both are embodiments of a taskscape, though one is

tangible in an enduring way and the other manifests physically only for a short time. Likewise, the poem as artifact will be considered in terms of both tangible and intangible forms of embodiment, the recorded (written) poem and the poem in performance.

Students of the taskscape argue that a performed embodiment is a critical attribute of that dynamic system, the performed embodiment of individual activities and the collected complex of all activities of all dwellers. The taskscape as a performed system, is seen to have physical consequences for all dwellers, such as how brain function has evolved to accommodate increasing sophistication of tasks. Mithen, Tomlinson, and Patel have all performed informed speculation, hypothesizing, and research regarding the evolution of language and music as well as of the brain and the mind, (Mithen, 2007; Tomlinson, 2015; Patel, 2008). I will use some of their conjectures to aid my considerations of the co-management of speech and music in the course of making, performing, and hearing a poem.

Embodiment and physicality of the taskscape have direct implications for making, performing, and hearing a poem. Treatment of these implications will be limited to the poem as an event of noise for which the written artifact serves primarily as a medium for transferring the poem, in latent form, between individuals separated by time or space. Likewise, in keeping with the idea of taskscape itself as an ongoing performance, not a still life, I work to consider the poem as an event taking place through time, not just as an unchanging object as one might be tempted to think regarding an artifact.

Finally, the slightly provocative title of the essay will be addressed in the terms of the taskscape, with focus on the dynamic nature of a taskscape that can only be realized in movement or performance. Anthropologists and archaeologists, following Ingold's lead, tend to use the words "movement" and "performance" synonymously. I will do likewise, but with care.

For the sake of keeping faith with the thought experiment of framing poetry in terms of the taskscape, I will adopt a perception of a poetry taskscape, in which the taskscape is the complex that is performed. However, I will also treat the taskscape as a domain within which poems, as events, are performed by being spoken to others in the more traditional sense of a performance art.

I will posit that, in the poetry taskscape the movement that is integral to all taskscapes may be experienced as breath moving through a body or as a player of a wind instrument may move breath through an agent of vibration, such as a reed or the lips pursed in an embouchure, and then on through the horn. In this view, I consider the maker, the performer, and the receiver of the poem as each serving, in turn or simultaneously, as the horn. In that role, each would be agent of both vibration and amplification. The poem may then be thought of moving through maker, performer, and recipient as breath through a horn.

The Taskscape: a state of motion

The taskscape, in anthropology and archaeology, is most simply defined as landscape plus temporality. The concept of the taskscape was first proposed by Tim Ingold in the early 1990s (Ingold, 1993 [2000]; Ingold, 2017). Ingold had grown dissatisfied with a common perspective in which human domains were viewed as separate from natural domains and a landscape was perceived as frozen tableaux, (“congealed” was the word he used). His anthropological fieldwork, among the Sami in Finland, helped him to see that time was the missing element in the Eurocentric perspectives of landscape. Once temporality began to be accounted, it was easier to see that landscape was a domain of constant change and that human participation and sociality were integral parts of a landscape, shaping the landscape, including his own activities as a

researcher. This perspective was the first formal iteration of developing the taskscape as a concept. Later iterations (Olwig 2008; Ingold, 2017; Rajala and Mills, 2017; Gruppuso, 2020; Gruppuso and Whitehouse, 2020) have developed the concept of the taskscape to include these attributes, among others:

1. The taskscape is a network of relationships
 - a. social relationships
 - b. ecological relationships
 - c. temporal relationships among polyrhythmic processes (often called resonance in this field)
 - d. interspecies relationships
 - e. geological and geographic relationships
 - f. other: there are many more types of relationships than make sense to name here
2. The taskscape is dynamic through time, in constant flux. This dynamism is often called movement and is also often called performance. The point is that landscape is to be thought of as being in action with temporal direction, not static.
3. The taskscape is embodied in the constituents of the system, both human and other-than-human. The term for all of these constituents is “dwellers”
4. Activities of dwellers in the taskscape shape and influence the taskscape and are shaped and influenced by the taskscape
5. Activities of dwellers may cast off artifacts which are, themselves, constituents of the taskscape, shaping and shaped by the taskscape from which they came and of which they are a part

In short, the taskscape is landscape thought of as an event that occurs through time, an event in which humans play a part as dwellers and from which humans do not stand apart as if to observe a scene as if a frozen instant. Because it is dynamic and inherently subject to change, the taskscape is argued to be an embodied event, with physical consequences for all of its dwellers, both in the short term and on evolutionary timescales.

Patterns emerge recurrently in a taskscape, including patterns in human activities, such as tool making. Stable patterns may extinguish on local scales, but generally persist on broader scales when providing some sort of survival benefit. Human activities are seen as a subset of a larger complex of activities within a domain where ecosystems and social systems interweave in

a single system. The flux of the system and its subsystems, and its ongoing change over time, might be recognized in these emergent patterns. Gradual changes in patterns of activities may also change over longer periods of time as the taskscape itself undergoes larger scale change. Archaeologists and anthropologists have used the word “forms” to label these emergent patterns.

In the imagined stone tool making example that opened this essay, a troupe of humans may arrive annually to prepare the tools that they would need for taking best advantage of impending prey migrations. Were an observer to watch that pond-shaped basin for enough years, the recurring nature of the troupe’s patterns, their forms of behavior, would become apparent, as well as variation in those patterns related to variation in environmental conditions. The durability of stone tools provides a record over decades, centuries, and longer to allow just such inferences to be drawn.

A wheat field might provide another example of pattern emerging from taskscape dynamics. Over the course of a year the system changes, from planting to growing to harvesting to planting again. During this time, humans could be seen moving across the system, conducting their tasks. A student of that wheat field would see patterns of activity recur year after year, and conclude that the observed forms are emergent from the taskscape itself. Tim Ingold, (1993[2000], 2017), used the painting called “The Harvesters”, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, as a basis for a rich explication of the wheat field example in terms of taskscape dynamics.

Performance, movement, and emergent pattern are critical concepts for students of the taskscape, resulting in and reflective of an embodiment of process itself in the taskscape and its constituents. As a poet, all three processes appeal to me strongly. I experience a poem with the fullest pleasure when I perceive it as an ephemeral event: the poem in performance, the poem moving through time, the poem enacting the forms of language generally as well as the more

specific forms of verse, physically rendered as sound waves. I often struggle to relate to the poem as an artifact, ensconced in pixels or paper and ink. In that light, Ingold, (1993 [2000]), provides succinct outline for what will be key premises of this essay. Ingold writes, with symphonic music in mind,

...the forms of the taskscape, like those of music, come into being through movement. Music exists only when it is being performed; it does not pre-exist, as is sometimes thought, in the score, any more than a cake pre-exists in the recipe for making it. Similarly, the taskscape exists only so long as people are actually engaged in the activities of dwelling...

This ephemeral and performed nature of a taskscape, and the analogy to music lying latent in the score and existing only in performance, seem to ring in sympathy to my sense of a poem being completed in the speaking of it.

Form in the taskscape is not unrelated to form the way poets use the term. However, the two usages are not strictly synonymous. In a taskscape discussion, form is an emergent pattern or set of related patterns that can be observed as either outcomes or attributes of a taskscape. The term is used to navigate the conflict between perceptions of an observed scene as static or dynamic and itself can become confusing among students of the taskscape. Using “embodiment” and “form” almost interchangeably, Ingold (1993[2000]) addresses the issue directly:

“... there has been a tendency – following an ancient inclination in Western thought to prioritize form over process – to conceive of it as a movement of *inscription*, whereby some pre-existing pattern, template, or program, whether genetic or cultural, is ‘realized’ in a substantive medium. . . . I regard embodiment as a movement of *incorporation* rather than inscription, not a transcribing of form onto material but a movement wherein forms themselves are generated.” (Ingold’s italics)

Please forgive my sample size of one, but Ingold’s sense of incorporation and emergence align very much with my own experience in making a poem. When I listen well to whatever it is that I hear within, I usually find that the form of the poem makes itself known to me sooner or

later. I do not know if the form that emerges incorporates me or I incorporate it. But I do know that the quality of the resultant poem depends entirely on the nature of the melding of my expression and that emergent form. That form may be a strictly fixed pattern of meter and rhyme, a loose pattern, merely adjacent to pattern, or the form often called free verse.

Sometimes the necessary form emerges quite late in the process of composing and revising, often involving a shift from a strict form to free verse or vice versa. Sometimes a perceived form allows me entry into what I hear in my mind's ear yet the poem itself finally needs a quite different form. Sometimes a traditional or received form immediately excites an emotional attraction in me, sets up a vibration that moves me to make a poem. But the form of that piece will still feel emergent. Somehow the received form causes a shift within me, moving seminal material towards conception and gestation. Even if I have been triggered by one of Shakespeare's sonnets or a villanelle by Marilyn Hacker, the form still seems to emerge by some internal process that I do not really understand beyond that I need to pay attention.

Embodiment, performance, and emergent form are all integral to outcomes of activities in a taskscape. As embodied outcomes, the stone tool, the symphony, and the poem all require investment of attention, time, energy, and directed action on the part of humans. Without investment taskscape outcomes, such as a hand axe, a diminuendo in the viola section, a poem spoken and heard, could not manifest in that world from which the taskscape itself emerges and which the taskscape frames. In this light, a taskscape is a dynamic system into which or through which energy has flowed in the process of formation and ongoing existence.

As with any dynamic system, the taskscape is subject to the laws of thermodynamics, most obviously the second law, that entropy is maximized. Following its formation, energy may or may not continue to flow into the taskscape. Which is to say, a taskscape may be

thermodynamically open or closed. In the first case, a taskscape in equilibrium requires an ongoing input of energy from an external source. In the second case, the taskscape will, over time, tend towards stillness and disintegration as its entropy increases. (Stillness and disintegration, of course, are also often taken for death in the case of systems that include biological components such as myself or, maybe, you.)

This simplistic statement, that a taskscape is a dynamic system that is either open or closed, is true by definition but not yet useful. It is also a statement of the obvious that might not, normally, be justified in an essay on poetry. However, I hope to use the notion of a thermodynamically open system to point towards a certain kind of beauty that might become available by allowing a poem to move through a person as energy moves through an open dynamic system. Under the metaphor of movement of energy, the title of this essay, “Getting Played” might make a certain sense. As this essay progresses, this movement of energy will come to be viewed as akin to breath and that word, “breath” will eventually replace “movement of energy,” as forewarned in the introduction. But the real reason I feel moved to deck this essay with trappings of thermodynamics is to attempt to deflect your attention away from any sort of spiritual malarky you may be tempted to impute to later portions of the meditations pixelated here.

My interest in the taskscape was first piqued by Tomlinson, (2015), who used of the concept as he conjectured on the co-evolution of music and language. I had just finished reading Mithen’s work on the evolution of music and language (Mithen, 2007), which suggests that language arose out of the musical propensities and expressions of our forebears. Though Mithen did not explicitly employ the term “taskscape”, he applied the concept implicitly in ways that made intuitive sense to me.

Tomlinson's explanation of the taskscape was a bit cryptic and led me to an initial misunderstanding. I first thought that the task itself was the focal point and that the task defined a taskscape, as the word "taskscape" itself connotes. Wrong, but not horribly wrong, and not negating my apprehension of the simple, metaphorical power of the term itself.

As a biologist familiar with notions of sociobiology (see Wilson, 1975) and evolutionary psychology (Wright, 1994), I was already fascinated with the social dynamics observed in a wide variety of species that use coordinated group behavior as a survival strategy. The taskscape made immediate intuitive sense in this Darwinian perspective on sociality. I also thought I could intuit the selective pressures on humans as gene-machines (Dawkins, 1975) at play in the notion of taskscape presented by Tomlinson and in the conjectures of both Tomlinson and Mithen. My initial error, believing a taskscape to be defined by a task, helped me to sort out the broad concept of *the* taskscape from specific outcomes, artifacts, and forms derived from the performance of *one* specific taskscape among many interrelated manifestations of taskscape.

The deeper I got into the concept of the taskscape the more I liked it. Concepts of social threads and fabrics mark much of the thinking centered around the taskscape, with the role of the human integrated into and subject to the dynamism of the system. I am drawn to try to fit poetry to the concept of taskscape, in part, because of the sociality I've experienced in my upbringing. I am strongly churched in one of the common Christian denominations. I grew up participating in the uses of language for sewing together various social fabrics found within a congregation and for nurturing individual congregants. Most of that language was poetic and no small amount of it was actual verse. Language, often received language that is sonically beautiful and strongly evocative, comprises a liturgy of a Sunday morning and ties members of a congregation together in a complex of relationships modeled on notions of an extended family. As I became more

familiar with the concept of taskscape, I came to affirm one of my initial intuitions that the social ecosystem that I called “church” was in fact a type of taskscape.

My pleasure came also from another recognition of the taskscape in an important set of very unchurched communities in my life, those that are centered around commercial fishing. Whether working the gear down on the weather deck, or minding the catch as belts convey it, kilogram by kilogram, through the factory deck, or up in the wheelhouse, forming strategies, making fishing decisions, and committing the boat to action, there is a dynamic flow taking place within a cultural context in which complex social systems and artifacts of the labor are prominent. At sea and in cold storage warehouses grinding their slime lines, in canneries full of clank and steam, and along the docks while tuning diesels for an upcoming season, I could see and hear what Ingold was talking about, (Ingold, 1993[2000]), when he wrote

... the temporality of taskscape, while it is intrinsic rather than externally imposed (metronomic), lies not in any particular rhythm, but in the network of interrelationships between the multiple rhythms of which the taskscape itself is constituted.

I could sense the interplay of rhythms among the various dwellers, right down to the three pound sledge, the mis-hit pin of a hammerlock, the thumb, the dance, and the internationally certified utterances of disapproval.

In fishing taskscapes, I experienced less the polyrhythms that might be revealed through language exchanges and more the plying and plaiting of rhythms revealed through dance. So much of what goes on in the fishing industry is a wordless dance with multiple dancers, often on multiple stages, as when a boat negotiates waves to get on the gear quickly enough to meet delivery schedules, or a deck crew coordinate efforts to repair a wracked trawl, or a forklift operator plucks pallets from a cold storage to a freezer van. Sometimes the network of that

dance is choreographed, sometimes it is improvised, sometimes it plain falls apart, and sometimes everybody gets stupidly lucky, becoming unexpectedly rich or at least nobody died.

I can feel components of a taskscape in the poetry communities of which I am now part. This apparent poetry taskscape seems to share many of the social structures and attributes (and flaws) that I have loved about the church life of my upbringing and my life in fisheries. When I encountered taskscape as an idea, with its deliberate integrating of human sociality into complex of dynamic relationships, I felt at home in the familiar.

In all three sets of communities, church, fishing, and poetry, certain traditions seem to persist, even when many of the community dwellers do not know why, or might not even be aware of certain patterns and rites as being a practice of tradition. Liturgies follow set patterns from worship service to worship service to provide comforting and familiar frames of reference that let the congregants know where they are in their spiritual practice. But individual worshipers may not recognize the rhyme or reason of a liturgy, perhaps thinking something like, “We’ve always done it this way.” Knots and splices are always oriented the same direction, the direction that minimizes a knot’s weakness and maximizes its strength, but a particular sailor may not know that. Nonetheless, any good deckhand will still at least know to throw the knot like this, not like that, or else suffer the rage of the deckboss. Beginning poets are given rules of thumb, “show, don’t tell” for example, but may not know what the guideline means or how it works. However, a larval poet may well notice louder applause at an open mike for a poem that did more showing than telling.

Such traditions would be considered artifacts or forms by an anthropologist applying notions of taskscape. Effective artifacts, (liturgical rites, splices, poems), contribute to the on-going stability of the dynamic system in which they arose. As circumstances change, (growth of an

individual, evolution of a practice, evolution of a species, good weather swinging around to bad), those rites and artifacts will be adjusted accordingly or will fail to persist.

Traditions may also be thought of as having been made manifest, or embodied, in their taskscapes. To perceive such an embodiment is consistent with Ingold's notion of incorporation rather than inscription and the idea that forms (perceivable patterns) are generated from their taskscape rather than imposed on it. The Carrick bend, which is a preferred way to join two lines that will come under strain, the common perception that "purple" rhymes quite unsatisfyingly with "orange", and the Puritanical stance that Welch's grape juice substitutes perfectly adequately for the blood of the Christ in a Presbyterian communion liturgy, all naturally arise from the motion or performance of their taskscapes.

Underlying Assumptions: Poem As Temporal, Poem As Noise

Before suggesting a model for a poetry taskscape, I need to make the problem smaller because poetry encompasses such a wide variety of things called poems. To keep a discussion tractable, I have established two constraining assumptions which will hold as working assumptions for the entire paper. I pause to specify those constraints here and introduce how they will help define my use of the terms, maker, performer, and listener. The two assumptions are:

1. The completed poem is a performed event and, therefore, temporal and ephemeral.
2. The completed poem is a sonic event.

Though these assumptions are closely related, they not exactly the same. (Either assumption alone seems to relegate the written poem to a status of incompleteness. Later, I will suggest that

a slight relaxation of these assumptions will allow the silent reading of a poem to be perceived as part of a taskscape in the same way as a poem being spoken aloud.)

Under the first assumption, the completed poem is a temporal event that exists only for the time of performance and hearing. In this view, a completed poem is dynamic and ephemeral, an activity that occurs in and through time, as with any activity in a taskscape. Once the performance is over, the completed poem goes away, leaving only silence and changed listeners and, by extension, a changed taskscape. Under this assumption, the written poem would be viewed as incomplete, an artifact in which the realized poem lies latent, awaiting performance and hearing. In nonliterate circumstances, the remembered poem would be the artifact and, again, the fully realized poem would be latent in that artifact, awaiting being turned into heard “noise”. Under this assumption, the completed poem, spoken and heard, would be a different artifact, with different attributes and with different emphases on those attributes that are shared with the written poem. More importantly the poem as a performed event implicates the listener as an equal dweller in a poetry taskscape, a dweller with agency and who shapes the taskscape as much as the maker or the performer.

The second assumption, that the completed poem is explicitly a sonic event, opens the door to performance in the sense of the performing arts as well as performance and movement in a taskscape. Since the activities of speaking and hearing can only be sonic phenomena, the second assumption may seem unnecessary to state in light of the first. However, to further specify the poem as a sonic event allows an easier discussion of the performed and heard poem as an artifact that is distinct from the artifact that is the written poem. With the second assumption, it becomes easier to consider the challenges and rewards of co-managing two classes of noise, speech and music, a co-management that must be undertaken by all three dwellers in a poetry landscape,

maker, performer, and listener. Restricting the completed poem to noise rather than abstract meanings represented by such units of noise as words or phrases allows clearer discussion of the two different but related artifacts of a poetry taskscape, the written poem and the poem that is spoken and heard.

I distinguish between the two assumptions, temporal event and sonic event, purely for purposes of discussion. I wanted to make it easier to discuss aspects of taskscape temporality and rhythm at the system and subsystem levels separately from aspects of speech and music that demand scrutiny as the level of the artifact that a taskscape produces. In practice, due to ongoing recursion and iteration in a dynamic system, taskscape temporality and artifact attributes cannot be separated as if modules that can be swapped in and out without consequences for other modules.

The rich experience of silently reading a written poem will be discussed a little later, subsequent to developing ideas about the roles of dwellers who make, perform, and listen to poems. For now, I will point out that by slightly relaxing the assumption that a poem is a strictly sonic event, the roles of performer and listener can be seen to persist in a silent reading if the reader undertakes the labor of simulating spoken and heard speech using the mind's voice and the mind's ear. Simulating noise in the mind emphasizes the role of language as speech rather than as manipulation of a set of abstracted visual symbols, e.g. letters, words, and phrases, for conveying denoted meanings rather than scoring sound, as would often be the case with most other artifacts of literacy.

A discussion of assumptions is also a good place to note important caveats. There are two that I have alluded to but now must confess explicitly. The first is that I am not advanced

enough as a student of poems to discuss their full range, which makes the two assumptions above quite natural for me. The second is that reading is a joy-killing activity for me.

Regarding the first caveat, there are many who define poems more broadly than language art that is intrinsically dependent on producing sound. Such poetry lovers might include poems that are intended to be visual experiences of language. They may place high value on concrete poems or on poems in which a page layout plays an important role in delivering meaning but does not provide any notational function for how to render the piece as sound. In this essay, I exclude consideration of such poems as they are so far outside of my personal aesthetic and my formal training that I am ill-equipped to speak sensibly about them.

The second caveat can be restated this way: I am an ear person. I go on at length about poems as making and hearing noise because that is how I engage with language in an emotionally rich way. I am one of those who processes language visually only at great cost. Because of the visual demand of literacy on me, the poem on the page rapidly attenuates to a dead or dying state in my brain and in my body, leading to an experience in which joy has been murdered. Again, this is a major reason why I have restricted my discussion of the poem to the realm of sonic experience, sound made and sound received.

A Poetry Taskscape: Three Dwellers, Three Tasks, And Two Artifacts

Taskscapes are defined in terms of sociality and sets of relationships that are in equilibrium (in a stable system) but that remain dynamic and subject to change. In shifting from the question of a general taskscape to a specific taskscape, Gruppuso (2020) writes

Taskscape is the array of rhythmic movements, tasks, and activities that humans and nonhumans perform in the process of dwelling. ... 'dwelling perspective', a relationship approach that takes as a point of departure the animal in its environment rather than the self-contained individual. Within this perspective,

humans – as much as non-human animals – constitute a coherent totality with the environment; they cannot be understood separately. Taking such an approach means to emphasize the idea that any environment is neither natural nor cultural; it rather emerges along with the lives of its inhabitants, it is a concretion of their life activities.

A poetry taskscape would be much simpler than the model that Gruppuso addressed. A poem, under the assumptions constraining this work, is an ephemeral event that happens between and among people. The spoken and heard poem is either a consequence of established relationships or establishes relationships, making it an inherently social event. A poetry taskscape would be the dynamic domain in which a poem lying latent in an artifact is brought to completion by way of performance. In a taskscape perspective, all performances would be subject to dynamic variation as the dwellers in that taskscape grow and change as individuals, changing the taskscape by definition as its constituents change, with some contribution to change from each performance of the poem.

Change, and the iterative and recursive nature of change, in a taskscape, as it shapes and is shaped by its dwellers, sounds very much like a description of change in poems and poetics provided by Charles O. Hartman (1984, p. 140). Hartman was attempting to explicate two branches of free verse, that of T.S. Eliot and that of William Carlos Williams. In the context of natural changes in the conventions of language and natural cultural shifts, Hartman wrote

...the poem itself is made of words, or rather of language; it is a semiological artifact. This artifact is organized and made to mean, not only by conventions that make all acts of language mean, but by additional semiological systems that depend on further, specialized conventions. Many of these additional systems fall into the category of prosody. Prosodic form is an essential, semantic element of poetic language. But, on the other hand, the poem imitates speech and, ultimately, the dynamics of thought codified (or perhaps imitated) by speech—“the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective.” The relation between these two languages—the imitating one and the one imitated—has varied considerably in different phases of poetic history. At times the imitation seems, to both poets and readers, gratifyingly close. Poetic language offers the poet a powerfully precise medium in which to present “the poetic fact” it provides the reader with a precise guide for his own

replication of the poet's experience of the "fact." At other times, one party to this contract or community begins to sense a disappointing and even alarming disparity between the "fact" and the inherited poetic language available for presenting it. The supplementary conventions that define *poetic* language seem to petrify it; the language grows too rigid to keep faith with what the poet has for it to present.

Hartman's description displays the social interconnectedness that typifies a taskscape. His reader and his poet have expectations based on conventions which may be viewed as artifacts of a taskscape. The system he describes is dynamic, changing to accommodate changes that result from internal activities and shifts in external factors.

The concept of taskscape might be useful to a poet because the spoken and heard poem can only exist between or among people in a moment of movement and performance. Such a moment is relational, social. The taskscape construct, with its inherent sociality, provides a good framework for considering what happens in the course of a poem occurring through time. The taskscape naturally accommodates relationships between and among maker, performer, and listener, all in the context of the relationship each has with the artifact that is the poem. Whether that artifact is the written poem or the performed poem, each of the three dwellers will relate to it differently and those differences will affect the dynamics of the taskscape in which their activities occur. Those differences will also shape the poetry taskscape and the artifacts it will generate in the future.

I propose a model for a poetry taskscape that is as simple as I can make it, a taskscape populated by just three dwellers, maker, performer, and listener, performing just three tasks, and generating two kinds of artifacts, the written poem and the performed poem. Such a model could work within a single individual, a poet, who performs all three tasks, a performer who makes the noise and listens at the same time, or a listener who must reconstruct the event in their mind's hearing. The simple model could be easily extended to encompass multiple dwellers, from

collaborations between makers, to sets of different performers, to larger sets of listeners. But for the rest of this essay I will speak as if there were just three people dwelling in the poetry taskscape.

The two working assumptions, that the poem as both a temporal and a sonic event, have implications for the tasks of making, hearing, and listening to poems. Those three actions may be viewed as tasks, but they may also be viewed as phase states in the realization of a completed poem from its latency. In the course of making a poem, the maker serves all three roles, maker, performer, and listener, continually speaking the work aloud or in the mind's voice to the mind's ear in the course of composing and revising. If the maker wishes the completed poem to sound close to the same on the tongue of a different performer, then that dweller faces the burden of making an artifact that leads the performer to the desired sound, that which the maker performs and hears during iterations of making.

A performer is simultaneously a listener, whether for purposes of saying the poem aloud or reading it silently. The performer must rehearse the sounding out of the completed poem from latency in the artifact, be that artifact memory or literate record. This rehearsing may be conducted aloud or by simulation in the mind. A poem as artifact forces the performer to make decisions and test different ways to handle and co-optimize treatments of semantic and semiotic ambiguities, grammatical complexities, tonal possibilities, different options for pitch and melody carried by a voice, phrasing, and both regular and irregular sonic demands made explicit in the strings of words. Often those considerations are beyond the notation available in literacy. Sometimes some of the elements of proper sonic performance are deliberately left unspecified by the maker as part of the experience that poet aspires to offer to the performer as well as to the listener.

A listener who is not also the performer may seem to have the least difficult task. But, in reality, a good listener cannot be passive. The listener faces the work of making something of the poem on their own, without benefit of feeling the production of its noises from within the body and without benefit of the making the decisions that go into turning the poem, latent in its written artifact, into the poem as realized sound. Even an accessible poem, performed well, may place a high demand on a listener, perhaps the highest of the three tasks, a requirement to be open to what the poem would deliver but without the benefit of easing into the listening experience in the same way as the maker or the performer.

The two working assumptions seem to preclude written poems being silently read and enjoyed while not being performed aloud. However, a silently read poem can still provoke a strong experience of beauty or insight or emotion or any combination of the many outcomes that can be invoked or evoked were it sounded. And the written poem that is read silently still is an event occurring through time, as in any taskscape activity. But if there is neither a physical speaking of the thing nor a bodily hearing, how does read poem fit under the two working assumptions?

I had earlier placed the initial use of the word “noise” in quotation marks because I wish to use the term figuratively as well as literally. In the case of a silently read poem, the reader would be considered to be simultaneously performing and hearing the poem, making use of the mind’s voice and the mind’s ear. A silent performer/listener would need to make a conscious decision to simulate the sonic event of physical speech and its hearing within the mind. Such a simulation requires a very different kind of reading than is often employed for most kinds of prose. From this perspective, the model of a poem as performed and heard noise may then accommodate the seemingly silent event yet potentially powerful experience of reading a poem on the page.

It is more work and takes longer to say a poem aloud. Speaking a poem also may be too inconvenient or simply not allowed under many circumstances. The simulation of a sonic event in a silent reading is often necessary. However, the simulation is not the same as the actual sonic event. The physicality of the sonic realization of a latent poem aligns with the embodiment claimed for events and activities conducted by dwellers in taskscapes. Experiencing this physicality seems to me to be an essential component of a successful completed poem. Vibrations are generated and modulated and felt within the body as the body moves air past its fixtures for making and modifying noise. Those vibrations resonate and amply in the lungs then pass through air, traveling to the ear, attenuating along the way. Cell collectives in the ear respond physically to the vibrations, attenuating further. That response is transmogrified into an electrical signal by nerve cells, attenuating on the way to the brain, attenuating towards the mind, attenuating towards the soul.

A good listener must work to boost that dying signal, must propagate *something* in response to all that attenuation. The good listener must do some sort of mental or emotional or spiritual work to make sure that the spoken, even as it attenuates, may be delivered into a space of evoked experience and invite the self into a brief proximity and awareness of the unspeakable. To function as a good listener requires openness, whether serving only as listener, performer/listener, or maker/performer/listener. The listener must be open enough to sense what it is in the poem that requires propagation deeper into the hearer and must be willing serve that unspeakable cargo by carrying it the final paces into the self.

To be open is to be vulnerable. A poem that demands openness or intimacy is a poem that demands courage or at least self-confidence. This requirement for courage falls squarely on the shoulders of the listener, even when the listener is also the maker/performer or the performer. I

suppose not all poems make such a demand, but I suspect that beauty, in itself, does require courage, a willingness to release oneself into experience despite uncertainty, an act of faith. Furthermore, hearing is a profoundly intimate sense, seeming to happen within the body, and intimacy amounts to vulnerability. It is difficult for me to see how to aspire to beauty in a poem without making a poem that exacts some sort of burden of bravery on the part of the listener.

The world is a scary place with death in it for each of us and for those we love. Sometimes the fear is too much for us to speak or hear spoken. Existence is big, exceeding the bounds of language and is, thus, unspeakable. Much of being, especially for small and seemingly finite beings such as our species, exceeds our perceptions and is, again, unspeakable. Those of us who live with broken hearts may find certain facts, and even truths, unspeakable for the pain even though others may be able to speak those observations or truths easily.

Frightened creatures that we are, we want the unspeakable to be made small enough to speak. The poems that I love resist or challenge this urge to use language to cage the unspeakable, instead using language to invite me, or seduce me, to enter into an experience of the unspeakable, fearful though I may be.

A common human response to what frightens is to master it. This matters to the maker, performer, and listener. All are functionally responsible for the poem by dint of the reality that the completed poem would not be delivered without each. I believe that this responsibility ought not be one of mastery but one of submission and stewardship, which requires courage, humility, and compassion. I further believe that those experiences that cannot be fit into language, but which may still be evoked through language, are in jeopardy of being lost if stances of humility and stewardship are not assumed among maker, performer, and listener. I suggest that all three

stewards must surrender to the experience of the poem, must allow the fact of being, implied by experiencing, to move through them as breath moves through a trumpet.

Getting Played

Submission is hard. In this broken and soul-breaking world, this overarching taskscape in which we all dwell, humility can put a dweller at risk of humiliation. So many of us, starved for affirmation of our being, assert ourselves aggressively, pushing the wounded “I” forward.

Auden writes, (1962), in his chapter called “The I Without A Self”

To find out what, if anything, a parable means, I have to surrender my objectivity and identify myself with what I read.

Any notion of surrender seems foolish to those of us who must struggle to reclaim our true selves after assault in dysfunctional families or after marginalization by larger societies. Yet, surrender, humility, and stewardship seem to be required for a joyful existence, including being touched by a poem. Tim Ingold (2017), in revisiting the idea of taskscape in a paper called “Taking Taskscape To Task” writes,

Life is not something we choose to do but what we necessarily undergo, and to understand human doings as tasks is to frame them within these vital undergoings. Thus a task is not something you do completely of your own free will, as if you had alighted upon the world from some place beyond and owed nothing to it for your existence. It is rather what falls to you to do, an act to which you submit as indeed you must submit to a world in whose form-giving processes you partake, and from which you draw your very being.

Both authors refer to a form of surrender and humility that is much more of a simple acknowledgment of reality. We cannot master existence, we can only do what it falls to us to do. It is in this sense that I suggest the surrender to the experience of the poem. Such a surrender amounts to allowing the assertion of being, which is the expression of a poem, to move through the maker, performer and listener as breath through a horn. To submit to being played by the

poem is necessary for anyone who wants to suffer the awe that can visit in the presence of a beautiful and true thing. Even a thing so slight as some words strung together.

The listener has become prominent in my awareness as I have wrestled poetry into a taskscape. I have come to a more conscious appreciation of the listener as an equal partner in the completion of a poem as a performed and heard event. As I have made and said poems, I have always tried to be aware of the listener who will receive each piece. However, that is not the same as embracing my own responsibilities as a listener as I engage with making and performing. Nor have I been adequately respectful of the power held by the listener. It is the listener who has the final say, especially in the context of taskscape. If the artifact of the written poem or the performed poem affects change on a taskscape, that change is embodied in the listener and that listener is who shapes the taskscape towards its newest form.

In each of the three tasks at the heart of this model for a poetry taskscape, it is the listener who decides to become open to the poem. It is the listener who decides to act with courage in the face of uncertainty and allow getting played by the poem. It is the listener who decides whether or not to turn away from the movement of breath which is a poem.

The choice to turn away is understandable. If a poem is intended to grapple with the truly unspeakable, a clean, clear meaning is likely to be unavailable through the experience. And meaning that cannot be contained in words is meaning that cannot be mastered, which is frightening. Robert Lowell was reported to have said of Dylan Thomas, (Lycett, 2003),

He was a dazzling obscure writer who can be enjoyed without being understood. That willingness to enjoy without understanding is brought to the poem by the listener, even if it appears to be a decision made by a maker or a performer. I am convinced that the decision to be

willing, the decision to be brave, is made as maker or the performer listen to themselves as they work and become willing to hear.

Unflinching attention, or even flinching attention, is an act of power. It is this act of power that constitutes submitting to the poem, allowing the self to be played by the poem. Humility requires one to face truths rather than to pretend the real could be coerced to something else. Even when the real appears ugly or hateful, to experience awe and beauty, one must enter the presence of the real and one must allow the real to move through the mind and body. It is the listener's job to pay this attention. It is at one's own listener's behest that one must be humble and brave and, with as much power as one can muster, get played.



This essay merely opens the door to the model of a poetry taskscape. Much work remains. In particular, I have barely touched on any of the practical considerations of the two artifacts, the written and the performed poem. Many volumes have been written by others on matters having to do with co-managing speech and music. I think great reward would come of framing established discussions of poetics and prosody in terms of a poetry taskscape.

For example, consider the roles of the maker and the performer and which tasks and associated decisions are theirs alone and which are shared. It seems to me that for a poem to be completed (performed and heard) it behooves the maker and the performer to be aware of their individual and shared works. In discussions of poetics, I suspect more attention is given to the role and the tasks of the maker and less attention to tasks and decisions of performing. The maker's decisions and actions would include

- word choice and word order (e.g. phrasing and syntax)
- meter (in the poetic sense, having to do with emphasis)
- other formal considerations (patterned, free, etc)

But musical decisions cannot be easily specified by the maker since, in literacy, there is little or no notation to prescribe such things as pitch or tempo or dynamics (in the sense of when to speak loudly or softly, when to crescendo, etc). Musical decisions seem to be mostly up to the performer. That dweller would need to decide about

- meter (in the musical or metronomic sense, having to do with keeping time)
- pitch (melody: the voice high, low, rising, falling, etc)
- pitch (harmony: how to suggest it with a solo voice)
- dynamics (loud, soft, crescendo, diminuendo, etc)

Performance decisions may very well be a neglected aspect of making a completed poem. The taskscape model presented here, with its constraint that a completed poem is a performed and heard poem, might allow the performance aspect to more easily enter discussions of poetics. In discussions of the role of the performer in completing the poem, the issue of co-managing speech and music would be prominent and would include ways that a maker can use tools of literacy and language to suggest to the performer bases for decisions regarding musical expression of the poem.

A particular poetry taskscape was proposed and described in this paper but I did not confront that model with actual poems in close readings to see how well the model held up. After developing the roles of maker and performer further, I think this would be the most sensible next step. Do the roles of maker, performer, and listener, and their associated tasks, divide into functional components of a taskscape as easily as I have implied? I am not quite sure how to proceed down this line of inquiry, but I sense that it is important to test this poetry taskscape against actual poems before investing further in the notion or the model.

There are a number of other questions associated with a poetry taskscape that I didn't even mention, much less address. The taskscape, in anthropology and archaeology, is an important intellectual construct for dealing with cultural transfer of information, both symbolic and nonsymbolic information. How information transfer would be at play in a poetry taskscape is well beyond the scope of this essay but could be a fruitful line of inquiry.

The embodied interplay of music and language is barely addressed here, and not addressed at all beyond specifying the difference between the artifact of the written poem and the artifact of the performed and heard poem. Rich bodies of research on the brain, music, and language could be considered in the context of the poetry taskscape, its dwellers, and the dynamic shaping that constituents of any taskscape constantly undergo. Speech and music in the body would manifest in the two artifacts of a poetry taskscape in ways that touch on information transfer, the decisions that go into producing the artifacts, and the nature of meaning itself and how meaning can be carried by a poem. It is in this embodiment that we might hope to ask questions about what is unspeakable, what is possible to speak, and how the body might be delivered into an experience of awe by a poem despite the limitations of language.

References

- Auden, W. H. 1962. *The Dyer's Hand And Other Essays*. Random House. New York.
- Dawkins, R. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Gruppuso, P. 2020. Nature as a constellation of activities: movement, rhythm and perception in an Italian national park. *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale*, 28(3):629-645.

- Gruppuso, P. and A. Whitehouse. 2020. Exploring taskscapes: an introduction. *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale*, 28(3):588-597.
- Hartman, C. O. 1980. *Free Verse: An Essay On Prosody*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.
- Ingold, T. 1993[2000]. The Temporality Of Landscape. In T. Ingold, *The Perception Of Environment*. Routledge. London.
- Ingold, T. 2017. Taking Taskscape To Task. In *Forms Of Dwelling: 20 Years of Taskscapes in Archaeology*, eds. U. Rajala and P. Oxbow Books. Oxford.
- Inglis, F. 1977. Nation and community: a landscape and its morality. *Sociological Review* 25: 489-514.
- Larkin, P. 1984. *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces*. Farrar Strauss Giroux. New York.
- Lycett, A. 2003. *Dylan Thomas: A New Life*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. London.
- Mithen, S. 2007. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins Of Music, Language, Mind, And Body*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.
- Olwig, K. 2008. Performing on the landscape versus doing landscape: perambulatory practice, sight, and the senses of belonging, in *Ways Of Walking: Ethnography and practice on foot*, eds. T. Ingold and J. Lee Vergunst, Ashgate.
- Patel, A. D. 2008. *Music, Language. And The Brain*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Rajalla, U. and P. Mills. 2017. Introduction: from taskscape to ceramiscene and beyond. In *Forms Of Dwelling: 20 Years of Taskscapes in Archaeology*, eds. U. Rajala and P. Mills. Oxbow Books. Oxford.
- Tomlinson, G. 2015. *A Million Years Of Music: The Emergence Of Human Modernity*. Zone Books, New York.

Wilson, E. O. 1975. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.

Wright, R. 1994. *The Moral Animal*. Vintage Books. New York.