My title frames the topic of performance criticism in terms of a conversion narrative, and is only partly tongue-in-cheek. Performance criticism erupted into my scholarly work like a geyser, baptizing familiar analytical tools with a salty spray. The tonic tasted bad but it did its work. I hope this essay will suggest how this curative can shape a scholar and influence interpretation.

My interest in biblical material rests on my concern that the New Testament too often supports inaccurate perceptions of the world. Its use over two millennia has too often been used to authorize interpretations of its contents as mandates for brutality and oppression. Yet scholarly explorations of the historical Jesus and our growing understanding of the history of early Christianity strongly indicate a different trajectory for the Jesus movement at its inception.1 I have therefore sought clues for faithful readings of the New Testament that promise different results in our own time. My efforts have assumed that faithful readings begin in the language of the compositions themselves. In an effort to retrieve aspects of earlier interpretative traditions of the New Testament and the materials used to compose it, I have asked how its original audiences may have experienced these literary compositions as spoken performances.

Orality studies inaugurated by Walter Ong and in New Testament studies by Werner Kelber have awakened a modern appreciation of the public, performed character of ancient literature.2 What we read silently, ancient audiences heard in theaters, courtrooms, and marketplaces. This realization challenges conventional understandings of literary composition and publication as we learn to appreciate that the elements of composition in antiquity were not letters or even words, but sounds. Thus, I have sought to invent an empirically based method to analyze Hellenistic Greek literature as speech and to approach New Testament compositions as linear streams of sound.3

The power and beauty of spoken


sound have persuaded me that the New Testament’s very language enshrouds a code that prescribes fresh interpretation. By analyzing the spoken sounds of the New Testament at the level of the phoneme, syllable, and colon, I have noticed complex systems of auditory patterns, even in literary strata sometimes judged to be devoid of sophisticated technique, such as Q and the Gospel of Mark. Such patterns function at the level of the signifier rather than the signified; in other words, they occur in units of language that do not necessarily carry semantic meaning. Since such patterns operate independently of semantics, their impact on meaning sometimes is not immediately apparent. Each composition’s sounds, not its words, create its structure. A composition’s auditory architecture frames the house in which its meaning resides. So the relationship sound to meaning becomes comprehensible first in its structural integrity, its design, rather than in its “message.” In fact, the notion that a New Testament composition has a message for the individual, solitary reader is presumptive. It skips over multiple vehicles of meaning inherent in the composition’s language and neglects its social impact as performance.

The relevance of performance criticism to these concerns might seem obvious, but it took a long time to dawn on me, primarily because my work had engaged the Greek text, whereas performances for contemporary audiences necessarily take place in modern languages. I had long since resigned myself to the irrecoverable loss of anything like an ancient performance experience. I knew something of what Professor Rhoads, his colleagues, and students were about, but I reckoned their concerns to be different from mine and their trajectory aimed toward a divergent goal: making the New Testament “come alive” for the modern believer. In other words, I did not appreciate the value of performance criticism as criticism.

In 2008, Professor Rhoads challenged me to perform the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), the New Testament passage whose sounds I had studied most closely. I accepted his challenge as an experiment and without desiring or expecting any particular outcome. I have now performed the Sermon on the Mount twice for two similar audiences—by any account, a modest if not minimal body of experience. Nevertheless, the work of performance has reorganized my working understanding of the Sermon because it presents questions that seldom arise in the course of biblical criticism conducted silently.

In a subsequent conversation in which Professor Rhoads and I reflected on the power of performance to transform interpretation, he issued a second challenge: to write a performance commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Such a commentary remains beyond the scope of this article, nor can my limited experience with performance criticism yet support such a comprehensive effort. Yet I offer the following reflection as an attempt to come to terms with all that performance criticism has to offer. More importantly, I offer this essay as a tribute to Professor Rhoads’ inspiration for scholars newly introduced to performance criticism, and as a promise to pursue his vision.

I will consider various aspects of performance as they relate to the Sermon on the Mount and expand interpretative possibilities presented by the challenge of performance.

**Setting**

The gallons of ink that have been spilled analyzing the setting of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel do not begin to address the challenges that face a
contemporary performer of the Sermon. No such performance even attempts to recreate an ancient performance context, since modern and ancient audiences share so little in common. Nevertheless, every performance must create some context, or at least acknowledge that the failure to do so implies a context.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount is a speech framed by a narrative. In the case of my performances, the Sermon functioned as a dramatic performance framed by a scholarly lecture. Stripped of its narrative frame, the Sermon lacks all the echoes of its framing story: paternity questions (1:1–17; 3:9–17), authority problems (2:1–23; 3:7–10), and the conflict between demonstrated righteousness and righteousness that remains hidden (1:18–25; 3:13–15). A faithful performance of the Sermon on the Mount must somehow capture these resonances or risk reducing the Sermon to a litany of moralistic platitudes.

In addition to creating a narrative frame for performance, a performer must cast the audience in a dramatic role. In a performance of the Sermon on the Mount, a performer must decide whether to deliver the Sermon as if audience members were receiving it from their contemporary points of view, or whether they are cast as characters in the larger gospel narrative, with opportunities to build sympathy for its protagonist or create allegiances with other characters or factions.

In my case, motivated primarily by pragmatic concerns relating to performance time limits, I chose to address the Sermon to my listeners’ native context, insofar as I imagined it. The first problem that attends such a decision is that of avoiding anachronism. Choosing modern equivalents for “when you are offering your gift at the altar” (5:23), “no one can serve two masters” (6:24), or the lilies of the field “neither toil nor spin” (6:28) challenges a performer of the Sermon on the Mount to navigate between the Scylla of irrelevance and the Charybdis of infidelity to the text.

Translating an ancient composition into a contemporary context presents interpretative opportunities, especially in matters of style. Colloquialisms such as, “back in the day they used to say…” for “you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times” (5:21, 33), can signal that the audience is not expected to adopt a persona in Matthew’s narrative, but that the Sermon is directed to them in their current context. Like most other choices about a performance context, this choice presents problems that challenge interpretation. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount a series of prohibitions in 6:19–7:6 addresses the audience directly and criticizes their actions: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth” (6:19); “Do not worry about your life” (6:25); “Do not judge” (7:1); “Do not give what is holy to dogs” (7:6). The Sermon’s criticism increases in intensity until in 7:5 the speaker resorts to name-calling (“You hypocrite”). Although it only occurs once, this instance of name-calling gains force from the preceding section of the Sermon (6:1–18) in which the audience is exhorted not to behave like “the hypocrites” (6:2, 5, 16), so when this label is applied to the audience, its effect is stronger than mild criticism. It carries the sting of condemnation.

In a silent reading of the Sermon, it is easy to miss the significance of the word, “hypocrite,” when it is directed at the Sermon’s audience. But in a performance, its negative impact is inescapable and influences the Sermon’s tone from beginning

to end. If, at the heart of the Sermon, the audience is cast into the same category as their enemies, then perhaps in 5:1 Jesus flees the crowds more by intent than by accident. The possibility of antagonism between Jesus and the crowd suggests that the beatitudes should be delivered less as consolation and more as criticism. This possibility seems even more compelling as the beatitudes are followed by a section of the Sermon that likens the audience to salt and light, then contemplates their potential failures: “salt has lost its taste” (5:13); “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket” (5:15). Moreover, the Sermon progresses by implying that the audience has misunderstood the speaker: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets” (5:17). Thus it appears that a sustained critique of the audience builds from the Sermon’s beginning and is not limited to a momentary eruption in 7:5.

Characterization

Having cast the audience in a narrative role, a performer confronts decisions about the characterizations of other actors in the performed speech or narrative. In a performance of the Sermon on the Mount, the precise identity of the “hypocrites” who are held up as a negative model remains somewhat unclear. Even “Gentiles” and “scribes and Pharisees,” designate vaguely defined groups who are too often associated in the contemporary reader’s mind respectively as “unbelievers” and “Jews,” based on the Gospel’s history of interpretation. These are dangerous identifications that not only disturb modern social and political interactions but they also distort Matthew’s narrative.

A performance that neglects this problem by simply rendering literally the terms, “Gentiles,” and “scribes and Pharisees,” not only invites these distorted ideas, but also gives them vivid, embodied form. A responsible performance chooses different designations that capture the author’s characterization, either in an ancient context or in a contemporary one.

In my performances of the Sermon on the Mount, I have rendered “Gentiles” as “foreigners,” since primarily denotes foreign nations or people from a foreign ethnic group. “Scribes and Pharisees” is more problematic because the group is more narrowly delineated. In my performances, I have used the phrase, “news anchors and pundits” because it names speakers who command some authority in our culture, just as the scribes and Pharisees spoke with authority among Jews. Today, news anchors and pundits remain vulnerable to questioning and ridicule, even among those who grant them authority. Similarly, in Matthew’s Gospel, the scribes and Pharisees probably were simultaneously honored and disdained by Jewish believers.

Problems of the same nature attend the rendering of those blessed in the beatitudes, such as “the poor in spirit” (5:3), “the meek,” (5:5), and the “merciful” (5:7). In private study, such phrases conjure specific images for the silent reader but usually the spontaneous characterizations that these phrases evoke remain unconscious, even while they shape a reader’s interpretation.

5. Matthew introduces his parables discourse in a similar way, as Jesus distances himself from the crowd before speaking to them in 13:1–2.

of the text. However, a performer must commit to a specific identity for those whom the text names only in vague terms. Are those blessed in the beatitudes individuals with particular moral or personality characteristics? Are they actual characters who are known to the audience and are being upheld as exemplary? Or do they represent members of the audience? Standard commentaries register some uncertainty about the specific identity of those addressed but performance presses the question. A performer’s decisions about such characterizations shape the tone of the performance.

Translation

The art of translation deserves separate treatment in its own right. This effort has been undertaken elsewhere by many who are far more qualified than I to elucidate translation’s challenges. However, problems that attend translation take on new dimensions under the demands of performance. Printed translations necessarily serve a broad audience and need a long enough shelf life to justify the expenses of printing, publicity, and distribution. Translation for performance is dynamic. It can and must respond to each audience’s particularity. It is difficult to render briefly into English Matthew’s notions of “the kingdom of heaven” or “righteousness.” Even more, the demands of modern performance suggest that no single solution to such conundrums will serve every audience. While silent criticism can be content to exegete the text, performance criticism must also exegete the audience and address its unique characteristics.

Sometimes the dynamics of performance can point out translation problems. The issues of setting and characterization analyzed above suggest that, contrary to many modern renditions of the Sermon on the Mount that present it as generalized moral instruction, performance criticism shows that the Sermon aims a sharp critique at its audience and seeks to redirect its attention and priorities. Thus, performance tests the Sermon’s prohibition of anxiety, which is typically construed as general reassurance in the face of anxiety.

The Greek word merimna in this passage is usually rendered, “worry,” or “anxiety.” Yet its fundamental meaning includes a sense of being intent upon

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8. The NRSV has “care” for the verbal forms in 1 Cor 12:25 and “concerned” in Phil 2:20. Ten of the nineteen occurrences of this verb in the New Testament occur in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke where they incorporate the prohibition of anxiety from Q. Two of the remaining nine usages of this verb occur in Matt 10:19 and Luke 10:41, and the other seven occur in Paul (1 Cor 7:32, 33, 34 [two times]; 12:25; Phil 2:20; 4:6).
Lee. How Performance Changed My (Scholarly) Life

something or of having solicitude. So in a performance context for the Sermon on the Mount, translations that capture this sense seem appropriate. They suggest that, for the Gospel’s author, Q’s prohibition of anxiety should not be reduced to consolations about the needlessness or futility of worry, but that the prohibition gently scolds the audience for attending to the wrong issue, and redirects their attention. A translation for modern performance might therefore render the verb in multiple ways, such as, “I’m telling you not to focus so much on your survival needs…. Which one of you, by obsessing about it, could extend your life by even half a yard?…And clothes—why zero in on that?…So quit fussing and whining….,” (6:25, 27-28, 31). Such renderings do not simply dismiss worry as needless but they view it negatively.

Since translation for performance re-captures a composition’s spoken character, it should consider the added dimension of a composition’s sounds in its original language. While the creation of a translation for silent reading focuses primarily on the meaning of a composition’s words, translation for performance challenges a performer not only to capture semantic meaning but also to convey the connections between words and phrases that are implied by rhyme and other forms of repetition. Thus a performance translation of Matt 5:15 should perhaps choose rhyming words for “bushel basket” and “lampstand,” since they rhyme in Greek and thereby heighten the contrast between the outcome of setting a lamp in each place. Similarly, the Greek words for “distort” and “show” in 6:16 sound similar because they share a common lexical stem. But sound does not associate these words in English. A performance translation might capture this resonance and reinforce its point by stating, “Don’t be like those who distort their appearance so their fasting is apparent to others.”

Translation for performance becomes more difficult when attempting to capture the performed effect of onomatopoeia, since this sound effect in Greek often is not confined to a single word but is frequently carried out over several words or phrases. Rendering the semantic meaning of Matt 6:26 into English presents no particular difficulty (“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”). But to be faithful to the Greek text, a performance of this verse should sound like birdsong, employing frequent “t,” “s,” “st,” and “ps” sounds.

Translation for performance differs from translation for print because it presents spoken sounds, not silent printed marks. The added acoustic dimension illustrates that sound can contribute to sense in ways that remain independent of the meanings of words. Silent criticism can ignore this acoustic, non-semantic dimension of meaning, but performance criticism cannot.

Linear processing

The audible dimension of performance points out one of the most fundamental differences between silent reading and spoken word: time. The passage of time in silent reading remains under a reader’s control, allowing a reader to linger over passages at will and ruminate over their
meaning. In performance, meaning-making is time-bound. Audiences must attend to sights and sounds as they happen. Every sound has only the moment of articulation to make its impact. For this reason, repetition takes on particular importance as a primary tool for focusing a listening audience’s attention.

Performance relies on repetition to convey a composition’s structural integrity. Many scholarly commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount interpret the Lord’s Prayer as central to its meaning because they construe the Sermon’s structure to draw attention to the Lord’s Prayer as the Sermon’s centerpiece.10 As logical as these proposals might seem when reading the Sermon silently, performance does not support them. Although the Lord’s Prayer lies near the Sermon’s center, it cannot be presumed to function as its core theme solely on this basis. A listener must be able to apprehend in real time the thematic importance of the Lord’s Prayer. Yet when listeners experience a composition as a linear stream of sound, they cannot know when they arrive at a composition’s center, since centrality is evident only in retrospect.

Similarly, the supposedly framing occurrences of “the law and the prophets” must occur close enough in time for listeners to connect the two occurrences, if they are to function as an organizing device. But the two occurrences of “the law and the prophets” are separated by nearly three chapters, or approximately fifteen minutes of speech. Many vivid sounds and repetitions intervene between these occurrences, such as the repetitive structure of the antitheses (“you have heard that it was said…but I say to you….”) (5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44) and the repeated admonition not to be like the “hypocrites” (6:2, 5, 16). The acoustic impact of a brief phrase such as “the law and the prophets” that is repeated only once is not sufficient to organize the Sermon.

**Blocking**

The spatial realization of a performance, or its blocking on stage, gains energy from a composition’s audible structural features.

An audience’s discernment of structure in performance gives their listening experience a sense of movement or progress. For example, a performer can imply the Sermon’s larger structural features, such as its organization into eight sections, by tracing a path in the performance space and performing each of the composition’s distinct sections in different space. A performer can even cue an audience to their narrative role by choosing how close to the audience to stand, whether to embellish or partition the performance space with a podium or other props, how, physically, to approach the audience by walking toward or away from them, how loudly to speak, and even what to wear.

**Memorization**

Memorizing a performance presents perhaps the greatest challenge to a modern performer since, unlike the ancients, our culture does not encourage us to train our mnemonic powers. Performance criticism has prompted new studies of memory for performance. It reminds us that performers in antiquity found ways to bring long compositions into performance space whole and intact, without the assistance of prompts. Listeners, too, held literature in memory and processed its meaning skillfully, without the aid of print. Performance retrieves this ancient art. A powerful performance temporarily interrupts our contemporary trade in the sound bite and proves that modern audiences can indeed concentrate for longer periods than the time between television commercials or mouse clicks.

**Summary**

In this essay, I have attempted to suggest how performance changes an interpreter’s perception of an ancient composition. My observations come from minimal experience, yet even brief experience with performance can transform interpretation. The pioneering work of Professor Rhoads in performing the New Testament inspires a wealth of understanding, not just by making the biblical material more immediate, but also by furnishing the scholar with a fresh critical process that is accessible only through performance.

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