Essays on Performance Writing, Poetics and Poetry

Volume 1

Also by John Hall

Between the Cities
Days
Meaning Insomnia
Malo-Lactic Ferment
Couch Grass
Repressed Intimations
Else Here: Selected Poems
Apricot Pages (A Novella)
Couldn't You?
Thirteen Ways of Talking about Performance Writing
The Week's Bad Groan
Interscriptions (with Peter Hughes)
Keepsache: a companion selection to Else Here

Writings towards Writing and Reading
(Volume 2 of the present collection)

On Performance Writing

with pedagogical sketches

Volume 1 of
Essays on Performance Writing,
Poetics and Poetry

JOHN HALL

with a foreword by Larry Lynch

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on Arts Teaching and Interdisciplinarity

This volume is in memory of Dartington College of Arts and is dedicated to the graduates and colleagues whose intellectual company has been so important to me.

Author's Preface

This two-volume collection includes most of the essays—sometimes taking a very broad view of that term—that I wrote for publication between 1978 and 2013. These dates might deserve some comment, since there is no earlier collection and I had been publishing as poet from 1966. The 1978 "essay" was a memorial piece for John Riley (2: 210–215)*, following his murder. The only other one published before 1991 was on Peter Riley. (2: 225–232) Before that there had been a review or two and one aborted longer essay on an individual poet, but no sustained practice of thinking—and sharing the thinking—through essays.[1] I am sure that this isn't wholly a matter for autobiography and has much to do with the conditions in which certain kinds of poetry and certain kinds of teaching occurred in the UK at the time. Though fired, like so many at the time, by the polemical use of prose by, among others, Ezra Pound and Charles Olson, I certainly did not think of the academic essay as anything like a close cousin to poetry, and the teaching that interested me did not, to my knowledge, have a discursive network of journals and conferences. The difference in 2013 is striking.

There is another way of putting this, though. With very few exceptions, these essays were produced in response to invitations and, in my case—and this probably wasn't unusual—the invitations were few and far between until the 1990s. The invitation in 1984 to write on some recent publications by Peter Riley came from John Welch, as editor of the *Many Review*, a poets' journal belonging to the unrefereed world of small presses rather than to academic publishers or one of the stables of journals operated by commercial presses. I was used to responding to Peter's work in the epistolary modality of *I-you*, where responsibility to the addressee is self-evident, and was anxious about the third-party triangulation of a critical essay, where lines of answerability are much less clear-cut. Awkward as this switch felt, its benefits to me were also apparent, and an ambivalent sense of productive discomfort remains with me still when addressing specific writers who are my contemporaries. I am implicated

* References to essays that are included in the two volumes appear in brackets with the number of the volume followed by a colon and page number(s).

in their work, otherwise I would not be interested in responding to it, and the implicatedness is specific in each case. Sometimes it feels as though this must addressed within the writing; at other times, that it should be set to one side within the established protocols for critical distance. Carried in the etymology of the word *essay* is the prudent humility of the notion of trying something out rather than disseminating completed thoughts or fully formed knowledge from an authorised position. We all know the image of the teacher as the *one supposed to know*, often a seductive role where special domains of knowledge are marked out in advance or where a charismatic initiator starts changing the lines around these. But what is it that writers and performers know? (And what do their writings and performances know?—a different question altogether.) What *should* they know? What is the source of any authority they do have?

Having used that word 'critical', with its etymological trace of *judgement*, let me say too that I am not interested in the stance of judge-critic within these essays, whether it take the form of consumer advice or pronouncements on fitness of texts for some supposed canon. Of course, acts of judgement or discrimination take place all the time outside or before the essays. I write about those I admire. This implies countless exclusions but by no means accounts for all the omissions; in many cases, it means only that there has been no invitation. I am well aware that as a consequence the collection lacks balance in some obvious respects and is far from representing a full sketch of either my own interests and admirations or of the contemporary scene of writing that fits either category of poetry or of performance writing.

Some years after the pieces on two unrelated Rileys, a third Riley—Denise—came up with the next invitation, to contribute to a book of essays by poets on writing rather than on the written. How could I do this in good faith, except through further discomforts of autobiographical meditation, since I was not at the time "writing"? I could not be more implicated in the response. The resulting piece—'Writing and Not Writing' (2: 15–23)—fills out the pairing of two broadly different modes of engagement within these essays: the mode that is an extension of acts of reading of specific texts and events and the mode that attempts to understand the implicit values in such acts and the necessary acts of writing that enable them. I hope that some of these essays combine both modes. Others, I know, separate them out.

The motives and energies for all of these essays undoubtedly come out of my own sometimes related and now long combined practices of poetry and teaching. I was lucky enough to work for many years at Dartington College of Arts, an institution that assumed a close relation between teaching and arts practice and whose small scale put practitioners from different disciplines into close conversation with each other. Its emphasis on contemporary practice also posed a number of conceptual and pragmatic challenges, traces of which will be found in the following pages. I'll do no more here than name two of these that had a very considerable impact on my own thinking. The first is the notion of context and its inseparability from text: from 1976 until about 1990 I was preoccupied with pedagogic issues posed by a course called *Art and Social Context*. The second is the notion of performance, and all its morphological variants, very much including performativity. When a pragmatic understanding of writing is developed in the context of fine art, music and theatre—especially non-scripted theatre—this is very different from the understandings relayed and developed within—or just outside—the domain of "literature". Out of these convergences emerged something we ended up calling Performance Writing. The essays in Part 1 of Volume 1 take up this enquiry, which is still very much alive.

There are two volumes because it turned out that by 2013 I had produced more of these essays than could comfortably fit into one. There was also a logic, though an uncomfortable one, for the separation here applied, between those essays considering the idea of performance writing, together with loosely related pedagogical issues (Vol 1), and those explicitly addressing poetry (Vol 2). Because I suspect that the two categories of my essays have until now mostly been read by different people within different discursive contexts, I am hoping that this division is seen as no more significant than a separation into parts within a single volume. A number of the essays could have been placed in either.

I have made no attempt to edit out the original purpose and context of the individual essays and am aware that this has at least two effects that may be unfortunate at times: one, that explanations are sometimes provided which would seem wholly unnecessary to one set of readers; and two, that some essays repeat what has already been covered in others. I hope that readers will be understanding and that the repetition may even be helpful for some.

My thanks go to all the editors and publishers who first made these essays accessible. Details appear for each essay in the endnotes. Many other debts will become apparent from within the essays themselves. My own essaying is increasingly collaborative, even when not explicitly so, in the sense that I am aware of relying more and more on conversations with others to prompt and shape thoughts that I wouldn't otherwise have had, at least in the form they have taken. Performance Writing has been a collaborative venture through-and-through: the intense conversations with Dartington colleagues from across the disciplines that took place as we transformed the initial proposition of "performance writings" into a persuasive field of practice and study were among the most rewarding of my teaching career. Subsequently I was privileged to work closely with Caroline Bergvall, who not only took on the main burden of putting the proposition into practice as an undergraduate teaching project, but also, from the outset, of establishing its significance way beyond any one teaching institution or, indeed, any one part of the world. Her own practice played no small part in this, as did the articulacy and intelligence of her accounts of the field. My own pieces that deal directly with Performance Writing would be more profitably read alongside writings by her, and also by Ric Allsopp, and cris cheek, among others (see, for example, 1: 149–150). Other names will be found within. My thanks go to all colleagues and students over the years at Dartington College of Arts, whose company as thinkers and artists has been so valuable to me. Volume 1 is offered here as my own thanks to, and memorial for, that extraordinary institution.

Particular thanks go to Simon Murray for generously allowing me to include our jointly written essay (1: 164–181); to Larry Lynch for instigating this collection and for his editorial encouragement and support in preparing the essays for the press and for giving precious time to writing a foreword; to Marianne Morris for offering to write the foreword to Volume 2 and for turning her attention to this the minute the ink was dry on her fine PhD submission; to Jaime Robles for giving me the benefits of her experience and judgement in page-setting; and to Kerry Taylor for her invaluable range of advice.

John Hall, April 2013

The Quiet Ear of Conversation

a foreword by Larry Lynch

When circumstance requires an introduction, or a "placing" of his working identity, John Hall goes for this: "Poet, teacher and essayist". The last of these is the principal concern of this two-volume collection. In considering the context and cohesion to these essays, though, the other two also need to be in play, for it is in the various touch-points and overlaps between the three, as ways of thinking and contiguous fields of activity, that the critical energy of his essays can be located. It is in the complementary circulation of the practices and intellectual commitments of writing poems, teaching, and critical exposition and commentary, that certain social imperatives and forms of attention become tangible, such that a diverse collection produced over the course of more than three decades can be read as a coherent (albeit complex and meta-linear) narrative body. The three terms also serve a more prosaic chronological function, in that his adult life thus far can be appraised as a series of "phases of intensity" that follow the order of the activity types he chooses to define his working life.

Fundamental to Hall's work are two conjoined activities: listening and conversing. These specific modes of attention, and the particular qualities he brings to them, temper his approach to poetics, pedagogy and criticality. I've opted for "listening" in part due to its co-dependence on and with conversation, but also as a multi-sensory (so as absolutely to capture "looking") supplement for an expanded sense of reading. I want the idea of a finely-tuned prosodic ear working with a more general, less specialist or exclusively literary ethics of attention that takes other voices seriously and regards both as key to a socially valuable intellectualism.

"Conversation" can bring with it both "discourse" and "dialogue", which is fine, but it also assumes a certain sociality predicated on a permission-giving that upholds the value of inclusion, and resists the imperatives of canonical power-play and institutional propriety.

These two modes of social engagement seem to me to provide a texture of cohesion and collective intelligibility to a body of work otherwise

marked out by a multiplicity of subject and objective and a frequent interdisciplinary bias. As ways of thinking, and of activating thought in context, they found an early and enduring home in his work as a teacher. Whilst practice as a poet tuned his ear to grammar and prosody (matters which a number of these essays address), teaching opened it to a broader field of intellectual responsibility by locating questions around the social currency of knowledge (knowing and not knowing) within the wider fabric of his work. It's appropriate then, that "teacher" is the central term in Hall's self-defining triplet, and that teaching is the activity that shapes and informs his essaying more than any other. Here I mean "teaching" to encompass activities ranging from direct engagement with students to the design and development of curricula, not to mention all the conversations that efficacy in the full range demands. Specifically, it takes in his time at Dartington College of Arts (DCA) between 1974 and 2010, and his earlier years as a school teacher. Volume 1 of this collection derives from this work. Some of the essays are quite explicitly about teaching (for example, 'Arts for what…',1: 164–180 and 'Designing a Taught Postgraduate Programme…', 1: 195–207). Some are "of" teaching, in that they were written for a student audience ('Thirteen Ways…', 1: 23–41), or by invitation take up a pronounced teacherly agenda, as in the 'Grammar for Performance Writers' trio (1: 53–74). Others—I'm thinking of the sequence of 'Glosses' (1: 146–161)—demonstrate a care for terms that draws on etymology and both specialist and everyday usage. All the essays in Volume 1 either tracked, or were subsequent to, an extended period of pedagogic enquiry that took place at Dartington from the early 1990s through to the college's closure in 2010, around the emergence of an expanded field of writing practice that became known as Performance Writing. This is nicely charted in the first three pieces of Part 1 of the first volume. The work in Volume 2, though less emphatic in its relationship to educational contexts, is nonetheless indebted in its modes and methods to the particular pedagogic imperatives and ways of processing practice that evolved at Dartington and in Hall's work as a teacher there.

The primacy and enduring vitality he finds in conversation was cultivated through his own experiences of being taught, and of engaging in peer group exchange, as part of a burgeoning community of poets. Whilst reading English at Cambridge he came under the tutelage of the poet J.H. Prynne, a relationship that drew him into a wider context of poetic activity

that resulted in his participating (as poet, reader and correspondent) in *The English Intelligencer*, a poetry circular edited by Andrew Crozier and then Peter Riley. Although not included here (some have been recently collected in Pattison 2012), his first prose commentaries appeared in the *Intelligencer*, and can be read as a precursor to the celebratory essays on poems and poets that constitute the latter part of Volume 2. Indeed a number of these essays address the work of writers also involved in the *Intelligencer*, such as Peter Riley (2: 225–237), John James (2: 116–131), John Riley (2: 210–224), Douglas Oliver (2: 163–193) and Lee Harwood (2: 96–97, 103–111). The longevity of these friendships and the conversations they supported add weight to the huge value Hall places on both in their capacity socially to enrich the critical attentiveness of reading. Note also, that almost every essay in this collection was prompted by an invitation, often from a friend and invariably either in response to, or in advance of, conversation. I often think that were the essay to have only one purpose for Hall, it would be to punctuate the contexts of other (past and anticipated) occasions for talking.

Supervisions with Prynne and the critical energy surrounding the work of *The Intelligencer* were both highly conversational initiatives, and both entailed the granting of a close and attentive ear to the practice of writing. The idea of a practice (the doing rather that the done of writing), particularly one's own, as the object of sustained critical attention, was an informal proposition at Cambridge, taking place outside the curriculum, if not sometimes the university. *The Intelligencer* was not a university initiative and it would seem that Prynne's allegiance to any sense of curriculum was (at least in Hall's case) highly flexible. It needed to be, for were it not for his intervention, Hall would most likely have left university prematurely and disappointed. Struggling to reconcile his own emergent values with those he perceived, at the time, as belonging to institutionalised learning, the generosity and expansiveness of Prynne's teaching and responses to his poetry made his time in Cambridge productive and affirmative. The practical intensity of their conversations and the relative social and intellectual plurality of *The Intelligencer* poets countered his youthful disdain towards a knowledge economy that seemed to trade too much in the entitling of access to "what ought to be known", and seeded some attitudes to education, teaching and the handling of knowledge that find their way into his essays. This time compounded in him a deep-seated belief

in the social value of learning, but with an educational health warning firmly attached to the then (and still?) prevalent strain of "fully authorised knowledge" and social exclusion manifest in many teaching institutions.

Much of what Hall found informally productive and enriching at Cambridge was to become formally structural and systemic at Dartington, as were some possible correctives to what had troubled him in the former. 'Arts for what…' (1: 164–181) and Designing a taught… (1: 195–207) offer a historical background to Dartington and outline some of the key approaches to pedagogy developed there. The significance of the Dartington project can be summarised in terms of "practice" and "knowledge" and their variable relatedness. This could be recast as "making" and "knowing" and their social and pedagogic possibilities, when taken on in a heuristic doubling rather than the more normative dualism of either/or. I emphasise the importance of Dartington not because it subscribed to any singular, codified methodology (although it is true that over time certain approaches and values became engrained), but because it provided a distinct educational context for the thinking through and developing of arts pedagogy as a set of methodological propositions and questions, rather than as being rooted in disciplinary convention and cultural inheritance. It is this notably idiosyncratic set of permissions that determined the capacity of Hall's teaching practice to cultivate not just *what* he essays on (as is the case for many academics), but more important than this, *how* his essays do their work and *why* he favours certain modes of exposition before others.

Dartington developed a critical ambivalence to any sense of knowledge as a given body and as being necessarily proper to the advancing of a particular field of practice or enquiry. Rather than asking, "what ought we/I to know about what has been done in X?" the question would be, "what do we/I need to know about (and for) what we are doing in X and how do we/I need to know it?" This stance significantly shapes the way these essays work. Received wisdom and assumed academic meta-narratives have no privileged place or propriety, so the object or point of study needs to be listened to very carefully, on its own terms; any singularly knowing didactic voice loses currency, as the grounds for an authoritative reading become decidedly shaky. Hall's essays are alert to these conditions. They read as though asking, "what does this work need to know, or ask us to talk about"? More than, perhaps, "what do I know about this work"? Or, "how might this work fit within the wider critical scheme I bring to

it"? This is where his capacity as a listener becomes critical. To answer the call of the work's processes, material features and routes to meaning requires attention that is both close and open. Openness to what might not be known and to an axiomatic engagement with what is materially "there" engenders modes of attention and ways of reading that look to hear the substance of work: quite literally, what has been done, and then, what it is doing. This approach, which often brings to mind Gadamer's commentary on Paul Celan's poetry (Gadamer 1997), can be seen in many of the essays that attend to a specific poem, artwork or text. There's a brief but clear example of this in one of his two commentaries on Prynne poems (2: 203–209):

> But first, let's *look* at it very briefly. There is a column of text, occupying the full length of the page but only about half the width, left-justified, ragged right, with noticeable but not extreme variation in line length. There are no markers of sections or stanzas. Only the last full-stop comes at the end of a line. There is a title. What I see looks like a unified thing, long and thin and joined up.

The same essay continues through a simple (though far from simplistic) take on what the poem is doing:

> Here's a literal reading of the scene in the poem. Some children gather—or have gathered—to watch the "I" of the poem mend a lawn-mower. "I" narrates some of the process of fixing the mower and reflects on the children, not as individual social beings but as instances of genetics; as messages and as carriers of internal messages; as reliant on the pumping mechanisms of their hearts, as reliant on what they don't know. No speech is cited. By the end of the poem the mower works.

Hall's frequent recourse to a kind of "first principle" approach to reading and commentary is reminiscent of the Practical Criticism developed at Cambridge in the 1920s (Richards 1929). Prioritising the immediacy of the work's substance, and resisting the potential hijacking effect or critical foreclosure incurred by the supplanting of wider theoretical frames, are qualities often aligned with this method that he holds onto, but

develops through a distinctly Art School sensibility. Hall's criticism (and teaching) combines direct and uncompromising attention to the primacy of the work, with openness to the discursive productivity of knowing and working with that which is unknown (and in some cases unknowable), and to taking on an expanded set of arts concerns as absolutely part of the fabric of a text. I'm thinking here about his tendency to work into poems (and other kinds of text) from the perspective granted by their material, spatial and visual construction. This can be seen in the first of the two excerpts from the essay on Prynne cited above, but also in parts of the essay 'Eluded Readings' (2: 24–45), a text which also talks through poems and poem sequences as units of visual organisation in page-space as well as openly taking reading pleasure in lacking knowledge. The theme of the page is itself discussed in the two connected pieces, 'Reading (Il)legible Pages' (1: 80–92) and 'Reading a Polished Page' (1: 93–95), the latter adopting an overtly interdisciplinary stance in carrying the concept of the page and its reading into the context of the photograph and its frame. This essay, despite its relative brevity, is a critical one. It would certainly have been written in close hearing distance of his poetic practice, which has, for the last 15 years or so, included making an extensive body of visual poems for domestic photograph frames and settings. In this sense, it reads very well alongside the much longer (and similarly practice-led) piece 'Time-Play-Space' (2: 60–71). The two pieces gather and foreground a trio of themes—context, interdisciplinarity and performance—that temper Hall's thinking, and both reveal a developing preoccupation with reading as a contextual and situated mode of performance manifestly caught up in the exegesis of material *space* / *time* / *play* in visual textuality and language enactment.

Context, interdisciplinarity and performance: these themes could stand as the principal headings in a Dartington typology, and they certainly orientated Hall's work there and the expository writing it often prompted and always characterised. At Dartington the question of context was reified to the status of a fundamental conceptual and compositional determinant: to ask who and where an artwork (of any kind) is for and to what possible ends was fuel for teaching and wider conversation. A particular scheme of contextual thinking is the way these essays sketch the contingent relationships between specific texts and other social practices. 'Making it new' (1: 123–132) and 'Do Not Ignore' (1: 115–122) both,

for example, make a point of reading and processing textual and linguistic material through its social context; and not simply the social context in which the work takes place, but the ways in which the socio-political implications and functions of language and writing reverberate within, and augment the work itself, weaving texts and the ways they are encountered into a wider fabric of lived experience.

Behind this is the idea that properly to engage a practice, it is necessary to be alert to the conditions that grant that practice its aesthetic and social currency—that is, amongst a broader set of socio-cultural factors and other practices. Look to the trio on grammar (1: 53–74)), and note how music, dance and the performance of breath are alluded to as means through which to think language.

Hall's involvement in these approaches to pedagogy, along with decades of interrogative exposure to arts disciplines other than his own, has brought to his primary concerns of writing and poetics a developed acuity for critically enlivening aesthetic, conceptual and compositional dynamics in textual and poetic practice that are more usually treated as incidental or secondary. This is certainly the case in his work on the visual, on sound and prosody ('Foot, Mouth and Ear' (1: 133–145)), and on situatedness ('Not Showing' (1: 75–79)), but is most significant perhaps in his critical negotiation of ideas of performance into the literary domain.

This process is largely framed by the development of Performance Writing and is not one Hall undertook alone. Conversation and collaboration shaped the development of the field and remain its abiding dynamic, central to which is the "question of performance". 'Performed through' (1: 61) begins: "the term 'performance' is an invitation to debate rather than a fixed term with an easy definition". This interrogative stance helps open up performance (and subsequently performance writing) as an expanded field of practice and enquiry. In his critical work, ideas of performance relate primarily to a broad sense of embodied and temporal activity, further expanded to take on the uses of the term by Austin (1976) and Chomsky (1965). Just as these essays frequently ask that texts be considered as things that *are*, in material and visual terms, they also ask that they be engaged with as things that have been *done* (in their writing) and that are in the process of *doing* (in their reading). The seminal 'Thirteen Ways…' (1: 23–40). 'Arts for…' , and again, the 'Grammar for Performance Writers' essays, present this perspective clearly, and set-up a range of approaches to

reading and thinking about writing that are re-played in other pieces.

In these essays Hall's social and pedagogic commitment is rendered through the stuff of language, writing and textuality; matters that have themselves been subject to notable change in their means and contexts of production and dissemination over the course of his essaying. The increasing dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and the rapid emergence of new writing and publication technologies have seen the environments and contexts within which writing happens and texts take place alter more, perhaps, in the last 30 years than in the previous 300. Such a profound evolutionary surge has challenged writers, and those who discourse on writing, to expand and reimagine the practical and critical instrumentation and framing of their endeavours, so as to take-on the textual and contextual implications of a radically new and emergent literary landscape.

Hall's essays negotiate and open-up approaches to reading and developing writing in relation to these changed literacies and textual modalities. This is an undertaking that asks for an advanced set of conversations and a corresponding capacity for listening to practice through an expanded range of contexts and constructions. In particular, Hall's essays put the idea of performance to work, releasing it from the strictures of disciplinary specificity. It becomes an effective critical instrument or methodological device for thinking about reading and writing as things that are *done* (in bodies and contexts), and about texts as things that take place in material time and space. There is no canon of study or set of standardized critical approaches for this work. Rather, it requires modes of engagement and critical tactics that are openly responsive, contextually mobile and interdisciplinary in reach. The means and modes of criticality and commentary engendered by the development of Performance Writing have folded back into Hall's readings and responses to poetry, accounting, in part, for the distinctive features of his work on poetry for the page. Taken together, the essays speak of a vital dynamism and social commitment in respect to the activities of writing and poetics, enlivened by the quiet ear of the practitioner and the conversational drive of the teacher.

Larry Lynch,
April 2013

PART ONE

On Performance Writing

Thirteen Ways of Talking about Performance Writing (a lecture) [2]

1.

Composition and performance: in your own work, in your own subject area, what is the relation between the two? Which is thicker in the mix that is your work?

Does this come with the medium or the traditions of the form or is it a decision that you yourself have made about how you want to work?

This morning I had to put a tie on (Not this morning as you can see; I mean the morning on which I wrote that clause—last Wednesday in London). Because I don't wear ties that often I was very aware of what my hands were doing, of the thickness or density of the activity. I was not only putting a tie on—I was aware of performing the act of putting a tie on. That led me to think of two different approaches to a tie being put on in a performance.

In the one, an actor puts a tie on in performance as a representation of the fact that the character he/she is impersonating puts a tie on at that moment in the story. The act may give density to the narrative or to the character. That depends.

In another, the doing up of the tie is *the* point, is in no way an optional piece of business. An example could be a clown exaggeratedly struggling with a knot. As a spectator to this second performance you will probably find that you own hands are wanting to lift to where your own tie would be, drawn into the density and complexity of the act. Or even drawn across in imagination to the performer's tie, to help, to complete the performance.

Think of the relation of composition to performance in these two examples: in the first, the performer had to bring in a real-life skill, simply and casually, in order to perform a score; in the second the

performance itself is most crucially part of the composition, perhaps *is* the composition—the placing of part to part which constitutes composition shows us in this instance that doing up a tie in performance is itself composed of separable moves, sequenced and juxtaposed.

I want to hold on to this idea of density. The components of performance are not equally pre-composed; the components of your composition do not equally decompose. Where is the thickness?

Writing can be all composition—all, as it were, done beforehand—invisibly decomposed into performance—no thickness left. Or it can retain its thickness, drawing you in to the act, as it were, of language trying to do up its tie; not because it doesn't know how to, but because the thickness of language gives us from time to time a thick sense (a sense with density, like thick paint) of the medium in which—or, perhaps, better, against which—we perform our lives.

2.

For the first minute or two—and a minute is a long time in any performance—of Man Act's Dartington performance of *Jimmy Messiah*, no words were spoken in the performance space. There wasn't silence. There was noise: sonic noise through (I was going to say "from") the sound system; visual noise from the smoke machine; the physical noise of narcissism from the male body of the performer, Simon Thorne, cocky and strutting, even when performance words were spoken.

How was this absence of words written?

I have just written words back into the absence, after the event.

How was it written before the event? Or to put it another way, was there a writing event before the performing event, which prepared for the performance of no words?

How do you write no words? Would it help to ask a musician for an answer to this question? Or a visual performer?

A performance writer needs to know how to write no words; needs to know words, to know no words.

A performance writer and a performer—and they may be one and the same—need to know the duration of no words. How do you measure the absence of words in a performance? In what medium or dimension does performance time exist? A writer measures time on the heart-beat (the pulse), on the breath, on the held breath. A performance writer needs to know how long before a performer blinks.

3.

X is a performance writer

she writes pages and she writes performances

she performs writing

she forms writing which informs performance

what is it to perform writing?

she performs the act of writing

quite simply, she writes

imagine that there is a performance of X in the act of writing

or you, perhaps, in the act of writing

how do you perform this task?

Could you take another body and direct it to write
just as you write—that is, to move into and through writing just
the way that you do?

And if you did—the same thick fingers around the same pen, say; the
head at precisely the distance from and angle to the paper that you
take—could you direct that body to write what you write?

You who are a body, could you direct yourself to write
precisely in the way that you write?

Is it you who writes what you write?
It is certainly a body out of which you say "I" which writes what you
write.

As you write, did you say yes it is most certainly I who writes?

The I who says so and the I who writes is the same I;
there is no spectator here;
no performer watching herself write;
or watching the about-to-happen of the writing leaving this I-who-writes,
going out through the fingers into another space,
from where it can look back as though to say,
now I am the writing that *you* wrote.

A moment later—really just a moment that it takes you, dear writer,
to become dear reader—
two "I"s squint and split and are caught in a parallax of close separation.

And this is just the page. Because the writing then hovers on the edge
of a space which is the place of performance.

It is about to become topical—which means of its place.

The performance writer writes the space between the writing
and the performing,
where the writing is always about to leave to become something else;
where the I is about to become at least another I,
whoever's I that is, however many eyes there are.

4.

Y writes a page that becomes a book

when he performs that writing the words are on the page, which he has written, are in the form of the performance, inform it and are transformed in it

his performance cannot be contained by or in the words; the breath that inspires his words (quite literally)
the respiration which he so robustly modulates, breaks through, is held *and* suppressed

his writing is up against the physical hurt of talk; it makes you know that it takes all of a body to pass through the controlled slimness of these fingers—

of course it is not adequate, of course so much gets lost.

between a sigh, a scream, a gasp, a gag and a laugh—
(these are not words—are they written?)
there are words talking of simple things.

check out the names of things.

write the names of things quietly.

you may perform a spell against madness.

what is it that makes people write?

5.

Z saw the words that came out of her hands
she saw that once they were there
on the fabric or on the paper or on the post cards
from that moment on they were there to be *seen*

she saw that she had made something
and that she had made something that passed beyond itself, swinging
from garments on a line, say, but linking messages one to the other,
suggesting stories of personal violence

she saw that she had made something
that in controlling she couldn't control;
in putting her words out into a space
which others moved in and out of
there was a performance space in which these others had to perform,

caught in a narrative of swinging things and meanings.

6.

Performance Writing

Writing performance

Written performance

Writing in performance

Performance rites

Writing into performance

Performing writing

Writing performing

Performance in writing

Performance Writing

7.

Is performance a noun pretending to be an adjective—
i.e. is there a kind of writing which is performance writing?

Or is it an ordinary noun, followed by a verb
in the form of a present participle—
as in "performance running" or, tautologically,
"performance performing"?

More likely "writing" is a gerund—that is to say,
the noun form of the verb;
an action caught as a thing

8.

This is a lecture about Performance Writing in a series on the definings of the practical subjects taught at Dartington.

It is a defining, not a definition. Like "writing", "defining" can best be treated as a gerund, catching the present tense of the verb up into a noun, without losing the continuous dynamic of the verb: the process of the act of defining. If the process were to end in resolution we would move the defining into definition. We would know.

We won't.

This is a lecture. A lecture is a reading—it comes from the Latin word for [RED] "read" (sounding like the colour; rhyming with bed; i.e. past tense). What gets read in a lecture is, of course, writing. These two words, these two activities, are folded into each other, like the inside-outness of socks before they go into the washing machine.

I am performing a text which I wrote. Only when I look up and break away from the text will I be talking (talking is not the same as reading aloud)—but only just talking; my talk will be no more than a moment of improvisation—a cadenza, if you like, held in place by the strictures and structures of script(ure)—of the written.

Meanwhile, Caroline and Melinda are performing the act of writing. They write in front of us. They write writing while I write talking and talk writing in a written talk about writing.[3]