PERFORMANCE AND THE FOLKLORIC TEXT:
A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO "THE CHRIST OF THE BIBLE"

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1. Introduction

The recent trend in folkloristics towards a performance-centered inquiry has brought to light several novel approaches to the phenomenon of folklore. Many of these were touched on in the volume entitled "Towards New Perspectives in Folklore." One of the prominent features of the performance orientation involves a reevaluation of the folkloristic text. The text, formerly the primary or even exclusive target of fieldwork, remains important as a record and reflection of the performance process. However, the text is seen to be deeply rooted in its native social and cultural soil. Indicative of this new posture is Dennis Tedlock's admonition that we must attempt to capture as much as possible of the style of a performance. Transcription, which neutralizes the manner of performance, violates the integrity of oral performances. Moreover, as Tedlock points out, "the treatment of oral narrative as dramatic poetry...clearly promises many analytical rewards."2

With the shift in focus of the discipline, the text has acquired new meaning. As a product of "artistic communication in small groups," the text becomes a dynamic reflector of the conditions forming the communicative act in which it occurs. An important consequence of this way of thinking has been the fortuitous merging of the perspectives of folklore and the ethnography of speaking. The analytic tools and methodology of the latter have been brought to bear on the material of the former with encouraging results. If folklore is a sort of artistic communication, then the questions arise, (1) what are the significant dimensions of the communicative setting, and (2) given these dimensions, why does a particular text emerge?

The ethnography of speaking, especially the grid proposed by Dell Hymes, enables us to isolate the significant dimensions of the performance context. The question regarding the emergent text remains less tangible. Why does the performance take a particular shape and tone? In the following section of this paper, I will try to suggest one means of accounting for the particular character of any given folkloric performance.

2.

Kenneth Burke, in dealing with literary issues, outlined a framework that has proved of some utility to folklorists in attempting to cope with the artistic dimension of their material. He views literature, as well as ordinary conversation and folkloric performance, as originating in a social matrix in which speaker or writer must adopt an attitude, or strategy, in regard to his listener or reader. Burke claims that "critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are strategic answers, stylized answers."5 In referring to the strategic nature of verbal communication, Burke implies that the particular form of a given pronouncement, be it proverb or poetry, derives at least in part from concerns of rhetoric.

Roger Abrahams has developed the implicit connection between the artistic and rhetorical dimensions of communication. The particular form taken by
the various genres of folklore results from the speaker's attempt to impose a particular interpretation of a situation in the face of possible opposition. The aesthetic qualities of a performance argue for its acceptance. In the archetypical situation Abrahams discusses, the aesthetic dimension of folklore (that is, its form) proceeds from the social configuration in somewhat the following fashion. The starting point is the speaker's concern, that is, the message he wants to get across. In Burke's terms, we begin with the name the speaker wishes to impose on the situation. The speaker evaluates the setting in order to present his message in the most acceptable form, that is, the form most likely to succeed in conveying the message with success. His evaluation of the situation will suggest an appropriate pose, or performance attitude, which itself will favor a subset of possible genres. The formal properties of the indicated genre will be those least likely to impede the reception of the message.

To illustrate this process, let us consider the selection of a proverb. The speaker's intent may be that of social control. The circumstances of the interaction may dictate an indirect approach; perhaps the addressee is touchy, and resents criticism. The likely selection in this situation is the proverb, since its formal properties are such that it can assert social control without alluding directly to the concrete interactional impasse. Thus the proverb contains no specific pronouns that might implicate particular interactants. Moreover, its referential content is vague enough to allow the addressee to accept it without publicly losing face, in some circumstances. Of course, it remains possible that a virtuoso application of a proverb might change the addressee's mind by bringing the conventional wisdom of the group to bear on the situation in a particularly felicitious manner.

I am not certain that Roger Abrahams would agree with all the details of the foregoing exposition. I have merely come up with one plausible description of the process through which a particular folkloric performance emerges in a given context. It should be pointed out that the implication of intent and conscious reflection on the part of the speaker need not be taken seriously. In many cases, the performance setting seems to elicit a particular performance without the intervening conscious interpretation on the speaker's part. Another issue that has been passed over lightly concerns the speaker's initiative not only in selecting the appropriate genre, but also his further creativity in selecting a known utterance or improvising a new one. These are matters of great interest in their own right, but the point to be made here is that the aesthetic dimension of folklore can be profitably viewed as derivative of rhetorical strategy.

3.

As an antidote to the ambitious generalizations of the preceding sections of this paper, I will now turn to a particular application of some of the ideas discussed above. I will consider the sermon entitled "The Christ of the Bible," performed by the Reverend D. J. McDowell in Delano, California. The text of this sermon is available in Bruce Rosenberg's The Art of the American Folk Preacher.

My purpose in dealing with this text is to view it as an aesthetic structure reflecting the strategies called forth by the performance situation. In particular, I hope to clarify shifts in strategy as the sermon progresses, which bring the congregation to a veritable catharsis. The main line of sight will be the alternation of two modes of performance: the purely narrative mode, and a contrasting mode of preacher-audience interaction.
These are remarkably different strategies, and it is of some interest how they are controlled in the sermon.

Bruce Rosenberg provides valuable information concerning the performance of the sermon. Of particular interest is his description of the four channels in which the sermon proceeds. His notes on the performance include the following:

Recited by the Rev. D. J. McDowell, July 30, 1967, in Delano, California, this sermon was received with great enthusiasm... Mr. McDowell begins to chant sporadically at line 55, consistently at line 99. He is clearly singing in the lines after 146, and this is sustained until line 306 when he very abruptly returns to conversational prose.

These shifts of channel divide the sermon into five large blocks, as follows:

1. Talk (lines 1-54)
2. Semi-chanting (55-98)
3. Chanting (99-145)
4. Singing (146-305)
5. Talk (306-352)

Rather than evaluate the impact of these shifts in channel per se, I want to see how they correlate with other factors to produce a unique and momentary strategy at each stage. The basic index will be the extent to which references to the performance setting, that is, metanarrative material, intrude upon the narration itself. The metanarrative material takes essentially three forms: 1. pronouns of direct address that (apparently) designate either the congregation or the preacher, 2. reiteration of the title of the sermon, 3. presence of the benediction "Amen."

One way to construe the contrast between narrative and metanarrative is to refer to the functions of speech mentioned by Roman Jakobson. The function of simple narration would seem to be primarily referential, or as Jakobson has it, contextual. That is, narrative primarily functions as a means of conveying information. Granted, the selection of material, its arrangement, and other similar factors, approach some of the other functions of language. Nevertheless, narrative operates on the referential level. Metanarrative, on the other hand, involves the other functions of language. The inner frame of the narrative material is broken, and reference is made explicitly or implicitly to the setting in which that narrative is taking place. Reference to the performance setting might entail any of the other functions of language, especially the conative (focus on the receiver), the emotive (focus on sender), and the metalingual (focus on the code).

With this framework in mind, let us turn to the sermon itself, and consider the pace and manner of intrusion of metanarrative material in the form of direct reference to the performance occasion. For present purposes, I will concentrate on the three types of metanarrative material already mentioned. It will be necessary to distinguish pronouns that occur within the narrative frame from those whose referents are the participants in the larger occasion. The pronominal usage of interest here is that breaks the purely narrative frame. In addition to making this distinction, I will attempt to draw a few finer ones within the set of metanarrative pronominal usage. Jakobson suggests the fruitfulness of tracing closely pronominal usage:

The pivotal role performed in the grammatical texture of poetry by diverse kinds of pronouns is due to the fact that pronouns,
in contradistinction to all other autonomous words, are purely grammatical, relational units. 10

Pronouns are interesting because they necessarily encode the relationship obtaining between sender and receiver. While the paradigm of available realizations is somewhat restricted in modern English, this paradigm can be creatively exploited to define a great variety of degrees of solidarity and intimacy (or the absence of them) between participants in speech acts. I. A. Richards notes that, "many secrets of style could...be shown to be matters of tone, of the perfect recognition of the writer's relation to the reader."11 The abstraction that Richards refers to as "tone" would seem to be highly sensitive to pronominal usage. And tone, in turn, will play a central role in determining the rhetorical strategy operating at the different stages of the sermon to be considered. The analysis to follow will pay a great deal of attention to the character of pronouns occurring outside the purely narrative context. The other two types of metanarrative material, the reiteration of the title and the benediction, are more transparent. In the case of the latter two, I will be interested in distribution throughout the sermon.

The first section of the sermon transpires in the linguistic channel of normal talk. Many pronouns occur with reference to the actual performance setting, the great majority of these being the "we" which includes all present. In the first few lines the preacher blends himself and the congregation into a unity:

I would encourage each of you who are here today—let us take advantage of it (line 3)

The actual transition from the individuation of the opening lines to the expression of unity that characterizes this section of the sermon occurs in line 14:

I believe that you will agree with me this evening that if America ever needed Christ in our life, in our homes, in our jobs, in our city government, state, and internationally, we need Him today.

This line also establishes the outer limit of the "we" of this section. The sermon sets a tone of high seriousness by suggesting that it will be concerned with issues of global scope. At the very least, the inclusive "we" of line 14 encompasses all Christians in America. The mode of inclusive "we" is confirmed a few lines later:

We want to talk about him, this evening, if you please (18)

From this point on the preacher limits himself to the mode of inclusive "we" to such an extent that the "you" and "I" of direct address do not appear again until the transition to the next section of the sermon.

The sermon begins, then, with an attempt to establish a sense of communion enfolding all present into a single, harmonious unity. Hints are given that this unity of spirit among those present carries beyond the walls of the particular building, to include an amorphous mass of God-fearing Christians. The tone is benign; no one is singled out for examination from this collectivity. The preacher manages to establish himself as a trustworthy voice, one that can and should be listened to, by asserting his solidarity with the group, and by disdaining to disturb the repose and security of individuals within the group.

The transition to the next section of the sermon occurs as the preacher inserts
a metalinguistic comment on the inability of "mere words" to render the glory of God.

You see words, are only symbols of an artist,
that are used in creating images in the human mind
But mere words fall short (53-54)

Since words themselves are futile, the preacher enters into the channel of sporadic chanting (the second section of the sermon, lines 55-98). Reference to the performance setting is left off altogether, except for an occasional reference to the title of the sermon. The pronouns that occur in this section are all contained within the narrative of religious material. Even the inclusive "we" of the preceding section is wholly abandoned. It might be argued that the preacher, by leaving off repetition of the assembled "we," begins to differentiate himself from the collectivity. This first step towards the assumption of a differential identity is gentle indeed, consisting merely in the failure to sustain the inclusive "we."

Towards the end of this section of the sermon, the preacher inserts a metanarrative comment:

I'm glad about it this evening (86)

Two lines later we find:

Help me Lord Jesus tell your story (88)

These might be seen as harbingers of the technique employed to bring the sermon to a climax in its fourth section. They are only gradually inserted into the ongoing narrative at this point. The effect of lines of this sort is to break the narrative frame and place the narrative material in its performing context. The final line of section two provides a dramatic transition to the following section:

Help me Lord Jesus, I feel something coming now (98)

The sermon shifts into the linguistic channel of constant chanting at this point. In this section (99-141) the delivery of narrative is periodically punctuated with pronouns of direct address referring to the performance situation at the rate of roughly one metanarrative pronoun per four lines of narrative. Narrative content still predominates, but the sense of the performance setting has become much stronger. The metanarrative material takes on highly dramatic overtones, as in the two examples that follow:

I wonder are you prayin' with me (124)

Am I right about it? (137)

The tone of the sermon has changed considerably from the benign collectivity of the first section. The collectivity is on the verge of being dissolved. The preacher himself has become a unique center of focus as he begins to experience his personal (but public) catharsis. He signals his increasing state of spiritual arousal with lines like the following:

I feel something coming now (141)

The collectivity is also challenged by the probing questions addressed by
the preacher to the congregation:

I'm wondering, is he your pure religion this evening? (133)

Questions of this sort tend to set each individual apart, alone with his conscience before his Maker.

The section of the sermon that is sung contains an almost equal proportion of narrative and metanarrative material. The ratio here is about 1:1, such that every other line, on the average, contains a reference to the preacher or to his congregation. It would not be misleading to speak of a counterpoint between the narrative and metanarrative mode of performance at this point.

The concrete and individuated "I" and "you" are favored in this section of the sermon. The tone is both personal and challenging. Nothing could be further removed from the repose of the collective "we" of the first section. At one point a specific member of the congregation is singled out as an example:

Brother Moore, if I don't speak in your church no more
Keep your hand in God's hand (230-231)

Other challenges are directed to the entire congregation:

Will you pray with me? (157)

Have you violated? If you've violated he'll overtake you bye
an' bye (163)

The members of the congregation are challenged to put aside their complacency and to look deeply into their spiritual health. Personal vulnerability increases, and this makes reception of, and participation in, the sermon a spiritual necessity. The individual, conscious of his failings, seeks absolution in the experiencing of the sermon.

The congregation participates actively in the sermon. The preacher often calls on them for help:

Pray with me church (182)

C'mon church, and help me tell God's story (161)

The responsiveness of the congregation stimulates the preacher to pursue his spiritual flight. According to Rosenberg, these responses can be quite intense:

If the sermon is especially effective the audience may dance in the aisles, fall on the floor, or speak in tongues, but most of the time their response is limited to relatively more sedate cries of "yes, Jesus," or "that's right," to clapping, and to controlled toe-tapping.12

The preacher frequently solicits these visible signs of his congregation's arousal.

The preacher seeks assistance from his God as well as from his congregation. Appeals for divine inspiration are common in the sung portion of the sermon:

Help me Lord Jesus tell your story (146, 183, 186)
These appeals indicate that the divine spirit will actually enter the church through the medium of the preacher and his sermon. Other statements confirm this impression:

I feel all right now
Something moving in my heart (204-205)

The preacher refers to his state of spiritual transport, and the congregation may assume that the Holy Ghost has come among them, especially if members of the congregation are visibly possessed in some of the ways described by Rosenberg in the excerpt quoted above.

The public catharsis experienced by the preacher before his congregation reaches a level of intensity such that the preacher becomes momentarily identified with Christ himself. In the following lines, the "I" spoken (or rather sung) by the preacher encloses both himself and the Lord as a single sender:

He's my doxology, and my benediction
In Revelation, I'm alpha and omega
I know that's right
I started this business, I'm going to see it to the end
Am I right about it? (210-211)

In the preceding lines it is difficult to sort out the referents of first person pronouns. The "I" who started the business (line 213) seems to be both the preacher (in which case business equals the sermon) or the Lord (in which case business equals Christian world history). A similar problem arises in the following lines:

He said I'll not cast ya out
In the sixth hour, and in the seventh hour
I didn't know I was turning ya out
If ya keep your hand in God's hand
Let me stay in you
And high in you
I'll lead ya t'high heights
And deeper depths in my fire (250-257)

Once again, the business of the sermon is identified with the Lord's business in such a way as to compound the identities of the preacher and God. The speaker in lines 254-257 appears to be both Christ and the preacher.

Complementary to the merging of the voices of Christ and the preacher in the above selections is the identification of Saint Paul with the congregation in the following:

He's in his dressing room right now
Putting on his judgement garments
Gettin' ready to come back to this church
We will be waiting
Are you waiting?
Are you waiting?
Are you waiting Saint Paul?
Keep your hands in the Lord's hands (265-272)

In this piece of the sermon the hands referred to in line 272 appear to be both those of Saint Paul and those of the members of the congregation.
The climax of the sermon arrives with the catharsis towards which the preacher has been building since the beginning. The catharsis involves the identification of the mortal with the immortal. Christ enters the church, and momentarily blends His voice with that of the preacher. By the same token, the congregation is momentarily treated as one with Saint Paul.

Shortly after this moment of climax, the sermon resumes abruptly the linguistic channel of normal talk. The final four lines, which are sung, are these:

I'm in trouble this evening
Yes I am
I said I'm in trouble this evening
I need someone to go all night long
If you never hear me no more (301-305)

These lines mark a clear transition to mortality; the preacher has become himself once again. Not merely himself, but specifically a humble self. He confesses his weakness, displaying the humility of the model Christian. A new tone is set, and the sermon proceeds with great sobriety in the channel of normal talk.

The final section of the sermon returns to a primarily narrative mode. The pronouns "I" and "you" are found infrequently in this final section.

Thus it can be seen that at each stage of the sermon the preacher adopts a specific tone, or rhetorical strategy, towards the congregation. An important component of these strategies is the way in which the sermon takes cognizance of itself. It has been suggested that not only the presence or absence of metanarrative pronouns, but also the specific implications of particular choices between the pronouns available, have important consequences for the tone of the sermon. There is a great deal of correlation between the stages of the sermon as defined by palpable shifts in linguistic channel, and pronominal usage.

The following chart summarizes the occurrence of the various metanarrative pronouns and the other two types of metanarrative material - reiteration of the title of the sermon, and the benediction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>channel</th>
<th>metanarrative pronouns</th>
<th>&quot;we&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;I&quot; and &quot;you&quot;</th>
<th>title</th>
<th>&quot;Amen&quot;</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>talk (1-54)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sporadic chant (55-98)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chant (99-145)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>song (146-305)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk (306-352)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The distribution of metanarrative pronouns as reflected in the chart has been dealt with at some length above. The title reappears from time to time in the sermon; frequently in the final section, but once in the sung portion. The benediction is primarily a feature of the final section of the sermon, where it helps to set a tone of religious sobriety. With reference to the patterns brought out in the chart I suggest the following rhetorical structure of the sermon:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk (1-54)</td>
<td>to establish a collective rapport</td>
<td>inclusive &quot;we&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporadic chant (55-98)</td>
<td>to begin to dissolve the collectivity</td>
<td>simple narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chant (99-145)</td>
<td>to dissolve the collectivity; to heighten the spiritual arousal</td>
<td>introduction of meta-narrative references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song (146-305)</td>
<td>to achieve catharsis; to set each member apart with his conscience</td>
<td>counterpoint of narrative and metanarrative modes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk (306-352)</td>
<td>to attain to a state of bliss; to achieve closure</td>
<td>benediction; reiteration of title</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning the matter of closure, it should be mentioned that the sermon finishes on a note of collective harmony reminiscent of the tone set in the opening section. The last two lines of the sermon are the following:

So, if we violate he's gonna catch up with us after a while
The Christ of the Bible

The penultimate line returns to the inclusive "we" of the first section of the sermon. After the catharsis, the congregation becomes once again a unity, partly because of the moving experience just shared. The main theme, carried in the title, ends the sermon, just in case anyone might have missed the point.

By focussing on the interplay of narrative and metanarrative material it has been possible to trace the sermon from its calm beginnings, through a gradual increase of tension, to its climax in which the Holy Spirit enters the congregation, to its dignified repose in the final section. Except for the resumption of the linguistic channel of talk in the fourth section, all transitions of mood are accomplished with remarkable grace. The preacher first establishes his credibility, and only then moves to carry gradually the congregation to a higher spiritual plane. The sudden return to normal talk is anomalous from this point of view, yet I feel that it can be accounted for by reference to the abrupt return to mortality on the thematic plane with which it coincides.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a few guides to what I feel will prove to be a valuable approach to the folkloric text. First, attention to the tone of a performance as manifest in the pronominal usage holds great promise to those concerned with performance style, or the emergence of particular texts in particular circumstances. The various performance genres offer a wide variety of attitudes a speaker can adopt towards his audience. Thus the proverb bespeaks a certain pose, one of indirection, while the taunt or insult bespeaks quite another. In either case, much
of the aura of the performance resides in the character of pronominal usage.

Second, I suggest that the antinomy between the narrative and the meta-narrative mode represents a basic distinction applicable to most live verbal performances. The pursuit of one at the expense of the other, as well as the selective blending of both together, is likely to be evidence of differential rhetorical strategies. In the case of the sermon, and perhaps in those of other extended folkloric performances, the alternation of the two performative modes constitutes the element from which a highly dramatic rhetorical structure can be fashioned. Folklorists might do well to bring these two notions into play in their continuing struggle to come to grips with that enigma, the folkloric text.

NOTES

5. The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge, 1941), p. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 186.