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Résumé de l'article

On oublie souvent les pratiques rituelles en milieu de travail, tout particulièrement celles liées à la tradition orale. La vente à la criée est une forme ritualisée de commercialisation de produits qui passe inaperçue dans les travaux ethnologiques de langue anglaise. Cette stratégie de commercialisation unique et traditionnelle n'est pas sans connaître une certaine variabilité: manipulations des formules langagières, personnalisation du gestuel, adaptation du costume et des marchandises en fonction du public. Cet article s'efforce de mieux comprendre ce rituel négligé de l'ethnologie anglaise.

“TWIRLING AN EDGE”: OCCUPATIONAL RITUALS, VERBAL ART AND THE ENGLISH MARKET TRADER

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The English folklife chronicler George Sturt, in his journal for March 5th 1895, provides the following description of a scene witnessed in the town of Farnham in Surrey.

The market today - otherwise dull enough....was enlivened by a man selling cutlery. He was a tallish, wiry fellow, full of action and excited gesture.... I noticed how well he worked his lips, for expressive enunciation.... His goods were laid out on a strip of carpet spread on the ground and round these gathered, as soon as he began to talk, an amused and idle circle.

'I've walked all the way from Sheffield today - and if that's not a lie, I'll tell you one. My guvnor said to me, 'Sell them if you can; and if you can't sell them, leave them so that somebody can snake them, but don't bring them back.' So here you are: - a good butcher's knife for half-a-crown, two and threepence; two shillings! Coom! here's another to it; two butcher's knives for two shillings. Will nobody have them? Look at them,- handle them! Coom! they won't hurt ye: they're not infectious: they'll not give you the itch nor the smallpox...'¹

The man portrayed in this vignette was known as a “cheap-jack”, a designation conferred, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, upon a travelling hawker who offers bargains, usually putting up his wares at an arbitrary price and then cheapening them gradually. Nowadays, such an individual would more likely describe himself as a “pitcher” and be so known to his colleagues and customers. Pitchers may be found in many of the markets situated in towns and cities, large and small, throughout the British Isles. They are salesmen and women of a special kind who share a unique and long-established occupational

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George Sturt, *The Journals of George Sturt 'George Bourne' 1890-1902*, Geoffrey Grigson (ed.), London, The Cresset Press, 1941, p 119. This paper was originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Moncton, June 7-9, 1990.

culture. The English market emerged as an important institution of commerce in the middle-ages and pitchers may well have been around from the beginning.² However, their peculiarly ritualistic methods of advertising and selling products of various kinds seem to have achieved widespread popularity during the nineteenth century as the market shed much of its rural and agricultural character and became a feature of the industrial urban landscape. Indeed, as a marketing strategy, pitching has tended to be applied most frequently to mass-manufactured goods such as cutlery, pottery, glassware and linens.

While occasional references to cheap-jacks or pitchers appear in works of historical ethnography and social history³ they are not to be found in the literature of English folklore. This is unfortunate given the unquestionably folkloric character of pitching as both ritual and verbal art. Consisting of a series of sequentially patterned and repetitive actions in a recurrent work setting, pitching may be conceived of as an occupational ritual incorporating the rhetorical use of verbal art. That is to say, it is a form of customary behavior which encompasses a mode of discourse in which the speaker demonstrates a "concern with the form of expression over and above the needs of communication."⁴ Its distinctive features may thus include the "form of statement, the choice of vocabulary and idiom, the use of absolute words, the imagery of metaphor and simile, the set number of repetitions, the formalized openings and closings, the incorporation of cultural details, conventionalized greetings or directional orientations, and other stylistic features which are absent in ordinary conversation"⁵.

Moreover, the art of pitching is transmitted orally and customarily, often from parent to offspring, and usually through some kind of informal system of apprenticeship. Once acquired, the techniques and conventions of the pitcher are applied in face to face, small group performance contexts. The distinctive qualities of folklore, however defined, are its recurrence over time and recognizability of form tempered by variation.⁶ The stable and recurrent component of pitching is the consistent use by its practitioners of a distinct marketing strategy which informs and shapes the verbal content of performance. The manipulation of verbal formulas, costume, gesture and merchandize comprise elements of variability within the tradition.

² William Addison, *English Fairs and Markets*, London, Batsford, 1953, p. 59-74.

³ For example, Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld*, London, Pelican, 1972 and Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols., New York, Dover, 1968.

⁴ William Bascom, "Verbal Art," in his *Contributions to Folkloristics*, Meerut, Archana Publications, 1981, p 68.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 69.

⁶ Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1979, p. 23-48.



Figure 1: Barnsley market in the North of England.



Figure 2: Wimbourne market in the county of Dorset.

Having worked with and observed pitchers as a youth on the markets of my home town, I was able to supplement an emic knowledge of the tradition with fieldwork conducted during the spring and early summer of 1989. Sound recordings and interviews were carried out with four active or former pitchers. Two of them operated on Barnsley market in the North of England (figure 1) and two travelled to markets in the southwest, including Wimbourne in the county of Dorset (figure 2). Pitchers attempt to persuade their customers to make purchases by establishing a contrast between the worth of the goods on offer and the proposed selling price.⁷ They do this by way of an often elaborate verbal description of the merchandize which emphasizes its normal retail price, or quality or a combination of both. The “patter” or “fanny” associated with each product tends to be stylized and to incorporate a variety of orally transmitted verbal formulations. The basic pattern is illustrated in the following example from the pitching of Chris Dobson (figure 3) who sells china, glassware and assorted giftware on the markets of Barnsley and Salford. He produces from a box on his stall, a selection of brightly painted hand-held fans and proceeds as follows.

By the way now ladies, I certainly hope I'm not going to be taking any of these home because ladies, they are quality, they are hand decorated and what I'm showing you in the set, well, if you go into a store, you've a retail value of up to two pound odd for a pair. Well before we go any further, has any lady or gentleman read the morning paper? Did anybody hear the news this morning at three o'clock? Did anybody see it on Yorkshire Television last night? Due to high pressure, prevailing winds, there's going to be a heat-wave about half past three this afternoon in Barnsley. Now then, you'll be needing these. Well look, if you'll take them, never mind one-ninety a pair, one-fifty a pair (claps). I'll take fifty pence for the pair. Right, I'm only thinking about the heatwave love! Alright... There's no more on Barnsley, in Bamsley or in South Yorkshire for that price! There we are love, for fifty pence.⁸

The essentially formulaic nature of this sales pitch is readily apparent. The contrast between a market price and a store price for the goods on offer, the insertion of a humorous narrative or quasi-narrative, the gradual descent in price offered to the customers, the use of the ubiquitous triplicate repetition and the closing formula are all features of verbal art regularly employed by contemporary pitchers and paralleled in the eye-witness accounts of Mayhew and Sturt from the mid to late nineteenth centuries.⁹ Among the other verbal formulas which Chris Dobson uses repeatedly during his routine are the following.

⁷ Trevor Pinch and Colin Clark, “The Hard Sell: Patter Merchenting and the Strategic (Re)Production and Local Management of Economic Reasoning in the Sales Routine of Market Pitchers,” *Sociology*, 20 (1986), p. 172.

⁸ Audiotapes, fieldnotes and photographs compiled in association with this research are housed in the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Folklore Collection under accession number 90-065. Subsequent references to such materials will appear in the following format, (SWG 90-065 f.45, fieldnotes, etc).

⁹ Mayhew, p.326-9 and Sturt, p.118-23.

You're buying something there that nobody else'd sell you for the price, nobody'd be daft enough to do it.

That's yours love, and if you give me your purse, I'll get your money out and I'll even put your change back.

Ladies, what I'm showing you there for a pound, never seen daylight, moonlight, lamplight, twilight, only by gaslight for a pound apiece.

There's another set, and another set and Bob's your uncle, Fanny's your aunt and they're all gone.

That pitching constitutes a special way of conducting trade on a market is indicated by the way in which it is semantically differentiated from other forms of market-selling. "Barkers" stand at their stalls and shout out the prices of a variety of goods often in a highly rhythmical, somewhat musical fashion. In this respect they resemble the American street peddlars whose cries have been documented by Simon Bronner.¹⁰ "Barking" is most often used on English markets for the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables. "Lurkers" or "gazers" stand in wait at their stalls and approach potential customers one by one, using persuasion to induce purchases from them. "Demonstrators" specialize in limited lines of merchandise and frequently restrict their selling activity to one product. They often use a pre-designed sales routine provided for them by the manufacturer or supplier. (Traders of this kind in the United States may be referred to as "talkers" or "pitchmen").¹¹ Finally, "mushrooms" are those salesmen and women, typically new to the trade, who know little or nothing about selling and simply stand behind their stalls in the hope that someone will eventually buy something. When a trader comes to market he must decide which marketing strategy he will employ. His decision will be influenced by a variety of factors and may differ under varying circumstances. Naturally the trader's record of success will be an important consideration. Those who have had pitched successfully pitch most of the time. Good lurkers lurk a lot. Other things must be weighed however, including the location of a stall or pitch within the market. Many pitchers prefer a site on the periphery where potential customers have more room and fewer distractions. Weather conditions are crucial, particularly on open air markets. People are reluctant to stand around listening to a pitcher in heavy rain or extreme cold. Sid Lewis refuses to pitch in warm weather. Finally, certain types of goods lend themselves to certain types of sales methods.

¹⁰ Simon Bronner, "Street Cries and Peddler Traditions in Contemporary Perspective", *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 32 (1976), pp 2-15.

¹¹ Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin, "American Talkers: Expressive Styles and Occupational Choice", *Journal of American Folklore*, 96 (1983), p.3-33.



Figure 3: Pitcher Chris Dobson selling china, glassware and assorted giftware.



Figure 4: Chris Dobson performing a "spiel", "fanny", "pitch" or "patter".

Foodstuffs, for example, are hard to pitch. Alvin Porter pitched in the famous street markets of London but when he moved away from dry goods to the more individualistic world of leather coats, he became a lurker, because, he maintains "You can't pitch sizes".¹²

Once the decision to start pitching has been made, the first and most important part of the sequence is known as "twirling an edge" (some call it 'pulling an edge'), that is, attracting an audience for which to perform. While some pitchers simply start talking and wait for people to gather round and listen, most have other traditional ways of twirling an edge. One of the most simple and effective is to make a large noise. Alvin Porter used to ring a hand-bell when he wished to assemble a crowd. In Barnsley, in December of 1988, a young man perched atop of a display of toys was observed to furiously hammer a block of wood with a baseball bat crying "Come on you buggers, we're going to sell some stuff today". Another common ploy is to offer goods for sale at ridiculously cheap prices, sometimes even to give them away. Some pitchers call this "plundering". The technique was described for me by Sid Lewis who sells linens at Wimbourne and Salisbury.

I'll lift up something, say a pair of bath towels, you know, what I do for ten pounds a set. I pick out someone in the audience. 'How old are you love?' She'll say 'seventy-six.' 'Anybody older than seventy-six?' Someone'll say 'eighty-nine.' 'Anybody older than eighty-nine?' Might be ninety, I don't know. Whoever puts their hand up, I'll give 'em the pair of bath towels for a tenner, for a penny, a penny. Then I'll give her say, tea-towels, half a dozen tea towels, for another penny. I'll give about twenty quid's worth of stuff away. Plunder. Sets 'em (?) but I don't have to do it, but I do it because I know when I'm going to go to work, they're all going to buy, they start clapping and then I go straight into it (laughs) and then I take, let's say five or six hundred pounds, so the twenty pounds gets lost.¹³

Once the pitcher starts to work, a number of items are offered for sale with each attempted transaction being preceded by the performance of what is variously termed the "spiel", "fanny", "pitch" or "patter" (figure 4). The pitcher provides a detailed verbal description of his goods, emphasizing their quality or value, and giving the audience at the same time a visual display of their versatility, durability or other desirable properties. The final sale is usually, though by no means invariably, introduced by a price listing sequence in which a number of successively smaller prices are announced. The last price in the sequence, the pre-determined price for which the pitcher will ultimately sell, is accompanied by a clap or the banging of a hammer or gavel. It is in this price listing sequence that the most obvious example of the pitcher's use of parallelism is to be found. Not surprisingly, for the student of oral literature, a series of three prices constitutes

12 SWGC 90-065 fieldnotes.

13 SWGC 90-065, f.47.

an extremely common structural element in such sequences. The parallelism is accentuated in many cases when a dual list format is used, the pitcher providing, in the descriptive segment, an expanding list of the attributes of a product and following it with a contrasting list of decreasing prices. As in the following example.

By the way, does any lady or gentleman, by any chance, possess a microwave? Because what I'm showing you there ladies - It, right, it will go in your oven, or a gas, gas or electric oven and it is microwave ware as well. It's dishwasher safe, it's detergent proof, it's a lovely mixing, serving or pudding bowl. It's a lovely salad bowl for a table. And to buy, your normal retail price is two ninety-nine apiece. Well never mind two ninety-nine, two seventy-five (clap), I'll take a pound.¹⁴

In terms of the pitcher's overall strategy, this pattern of list pricing offers a range of potential prices, selects the lowest one and thus accentuates the contrast between the quality or value of the goods and the actual price for which they are being sold.¹⁵

As well as mastering the verbal skills necessary for twirling an edge, building sales pitches and list pricing sequences, the good pitcher must learn effective visual presentation of his merchandize. The physical layout of goods on a stall is referred to as "the flash" and must be designed in a such a way as to display the products to their best effect while leaving them easily accessible to the pitcher as he is working. Sid Lewis operates from a mobile stall (figure 5) and when he brings it to market he makes a habit of positioning it in such a way as to gain maximum exposure to the sun throughout the day. His flash is composed so that huge, brightly coloured beach towels provide a backdrop for neatly folded piles of sheets, pillow-cases and bathroom linens. Chris Dobson's china and glassware meanwhile is arranged in an elaborate terraced structure.

¹⁴ SWGC 90-065, f.46.

¹⁵ Pinch and Clark, p.176-82.



Figure 5: Sid Lewis operates from a mobile stall and makes a habit of positioning it in such a way as to gain maximum exposure to the sun.

One of the most famous of English market pitchers is Joe Edwards or “Potty Edwards” as he is locally known in Barnsley. Now retired, he pitched china and giftware all over Great Britain from 1945 until the early 1980’s. In his pitching routine, he coupled dramatic visual display with the traditional verbal formulas. Among his favoured techniques were, displaying a set of a water jug and six glasses in one hand, knocking a nail into a block of wood with a piece of fine lead crystal and his trademark, taking a basket containing a complete bone-china dinner service, throwing it high in the air and catching it without breaking a single piece. These tricks were all learned from his father during an apprenticeship served in the years prior to the second World War and Joe freely confesses that during that period, “I cost me dad a few quid in breakages”.¹⁶ Chris Dobson, who knows Joe well and has watched him work over the years, sometimes uses an amusing imitation of these techniques whereby he takes some delicate item or items, makes as if to throw them and then holds back at the last second acknowledging to the audience the likelihood of ensuing calamity were he to continue.

As is the case with the Texas dog traders described by Richard Bauman, a great deal of the pitcher’s expressive behaviour is directed towards the establishment and management of identity.¹⁷ Whereas dog-traders have a reputation for lying which they seek to combat by performing narratives which illustrate their forthrightness, market pitchers are sometimes thought of as petty criminals who sell goods cheaply because they have been obtained illicitly and who prove extremely elusive when complaints arise or questions are asked. Chris Dobson’s concern with self-validation is evidenced by the consistent use of a verbal formula which emphasises his integrity and reliability.

I’m not a fly-by-night you know, here today, gone tomorrow, you never see me again...
I’m here today and I’m gone tonight, but I’m here next Wednesday, and that, for a pound, is from me.

Sid Lewis believes it is important for a pitcher to display self-confidence and assert his authority over the audience. He maintains that by demonstrating resolution or even intractability in certain situations, he can convince observers that he means what he says and thus that his bargains are genuine ones. This may be accomplished through the use of a number of techniques. One of them he refers to as “rooking” the customers, showing them goods which he claims to sell for a ridiculously low price and then refusing to let them go on the grounds that they are reserved for the following day or the next market. In similar fashion, at the conclusion of a sales pitch he may start to sell a number of items, cutting off the

¹⁶ SWGC 90-065 fieldnotes.

¹⁷ Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies in Oral Narrative*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1986, p.11-32.

sale before all customers have been served. The implication is that those who failed to receive the goods were too slow to come forward, thus showing a reluctance to give credence to the pitcher's claims for his products. The following encounter was recorded at Wimbourne on June 16th, 1989.

Sid: Who wants another pair o' these for a pound? Linen tea-towels love, not a bit of rayon, linen! 'Ere you are, what's that one? The fruits o' Worcester.

Sid's Assistant: The fruits o' Worcester.

Sid: "Ere you are, would you like a pair madam? A pound for two. I think all they got in bloody Wimbourne is big houses, nothing in the buggers. Fifty pence each, they cost one ninety-nine to buy, one ninety nine each, they cost. 'Ere, what we got 'ere? "Ere we are, nobody want 'em? A pound for two. Sir?

(Female customer holds out a one pound coin.)

Sid: No, you can't have 'em now, you can't have 'em. I'm independent missis! I only put 'em up once. A pound a pair, they cost more to bloody buy! You're standing there picking your noses.

Sid's Assistant: We're losing money on that!

Sid: No, too late missis, too late. I can't help it.

(Customer protests)

Sid: No, I can't help it. I put 'em up. I've had 'em up for ten minutes, a pound a pair and you're standing there thinking about it. Missis! You either got no brains or your brain's as big as an orange pip. Who wants some hand towels?¹⁸

Sid, like Chris Dobson, is pre-occupied with establishing for himself the identity of a businessman of integrity and so has dubbed himself 'Sid Lewis-What a Fair Man'. This appears as a logo in a variety of locations. On the side of his truck, on his personal cheques, on his business cards and on the plastic carrier bags which he distributes to his customers. Chris Dobson has adopted from his father, who at one time pitched jewellery on Salford market, the persona of "The man with the earrings and pearls"(figure 6). He dresses appropriately in the belief that recognizability helps procure for him his customers' trust. For purposes of recognition Joe Edwards adorned his stall on Barnsley market with a huge cup and saucer which have remained there since his retirement, while Alvin Porter would sometimes hire a Rolls-Royce and pitch from the back of it in the hope that clients would realize that any man that could afford a Rolls didn't need to steal and therefore must be offering genuine bargains as an exercise in philanthropy.¹⁹

18 SWGC 90-065 f.48.

19 SWGC 90-065 fieldnotes.

Robert McCarl has coined the term “occupational folklife” to refer to “the complex of techniques, customs and modes of expressive behaviour which characterize a particular work group”. The above examples illustrate some ways in which occupational folklife may serve pitchers as a resource which embraces a variety of strategies to supplement and enhance their rhetorical use of verbal art.²⁰ The English market traders whose work has been described here belong to a healthy and viable modern-day occupation whose members function primarily in urban, industrial contexts. Nevertheless, tradition plays a crucial role in the transmission and enactment of their work culture, including occupational ritual and verbal art, and merits further consideration in ethnographically-based studies by contemporary folklorists.



Figure 6: “The man with the earrings and pearls”

²⁰ Robert McCarl, “Occupational Folklife: A Theoretical Hypothesis”, *Western Folklore*, 37 (1978), p.145.