

Is Performance Poetry Dead?

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In 2006, *Poetry International* at London's South Bank Centre included a debate between performance poets Lemn Sissay and Luke Wright. As one of the two or three people who voted for Lemn Sissay's contention that performance poetry is dead, I would like to continue this – in my opinion, long overdue – debate from my own perspective, as an academic specialising in performance poetry.

Crucial to our question is what we mean by 'performance poetry'. From arguments made on the day, I deduce that *Luke Wright* defines it as poetry that mobilizes not a reading but a speaking voice, and which puts the word in contact with music, non-musical sounds, visual elements and theatrical devices. These elements are not usually mobilized by 'written' or 'recited' poetry and therefore are not traditionally considered 'poetic'. However, in performance poetry they function as part of the poem because they are indispensable to the *meaning production* of the poem. From this perspective performance poetry is indeed alive and well: many poets mobilize such elements.

Lemn Sissay made the counter-argument that performance poetry is dead because the showing element has received so much emphasis that it drowns out the *actual work with words*.¹ He was especially critical of Slam poetry which proposes a notion of competition he sees as adverse to art. Sissay argues that an artist is not competing for the approval of the audience, but that s/he is always in competition with her- or himself. Performance poetry, having mutated into a show, is dead. According to these arguments Wright considers the main characteristic of performance poetry to be the performance itself. Sissay considers performance poetry to be poetry first of all; and performance to be a subordinate characteristic.

I'd like to introduce another – provocative – argument into this discussion by extending Wright's primarily *style*-oriented definition of performance poetry. I agree with him that performance poetry is characterized by its mobilization of poetic devices which are not elements of written poetry. However, my argument is that the mobilization of these devices is bound up with the *content* of performance poetry.

Let me take a short detour through the history of performance poetry. From the 1950s to the 1970s, poetry *performance* – especially in English –

1. Lemn Sissay outlines this argument in his 'News from the Beat' in *PR* 96:4 pp. 122–3 (- Ed.)

developed mainly as a form of protest and rebellion: think of the Beat Poets. At the same time other poets, such as Langston Hughes,² developed the practice as cultural expression. Because it worked well in both contexts, it was quickly adopted by artists committed to particular social and political movements. Poets like Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott Heron, The Last Poets and Linton Kwesi Johnson made concrete demands for social and political change. (This differentiated them from most of the Beat Poets.) They took a step beyond complaint, addressing their audiences as a community with whom they shared experiences, values and convictions. In these communities, the availability of the poet for discussion and interaction with his/her audience questioned authoritarian power relations that worked not only in the political, but also in the cultural field; the poet was now *situated within* his community, not someone who was superior to it because of sophisticated expression or depth of thought. Furthermore, the mobilization of sonic, visual and theatrical devices allowed poets to emphasize speech rhythm, vernaculars, and the cultural connotations of music. Poetry performance allowed the poets to *perform* a cultural identity that was a political issue, linked with concrete political demands.

As Amiri Baraka explains:

We had evolved through our practice a growing rationale for what we felt and did. We wanted Black Art. We felt it could move our people, the Afro American people, to revolutionary positions [...]. We wanted Black Art that was 1. *Identifiably Afro American*. As Black as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington or John Coltrane. That is, we wanted it to express our lives and history, our needs and desires. Our will and our passion. Our self determination, self respect and self defense. 2. We wanted it to be a *Mass Art*. We wanted it to Boogaloo (like them Deacons for Self Defense down in Boogaloosa, La., when they routed the Klan). Yeh, Boogaloo out the class rooms and elitist dens of iniquitous obliquity and speak and sing and scream abroad among Black people! We wanted a mass popular art, distinct from the tedious abstractions our oppressors and their negroes bamboozled the “few” as Art. (Baraka 2000: 502)

In 1996, Linton Kwesi Johnson is articulating a similar attitude:

2. The case of Hughes – whose work started in the 1920s – shows clearly how the articulation and performance of an oppressed cultural identity can be an expression of rebellion.

[...] my initial impetus to write had nothing to do with a feel for poetry or a grounding in poetry, rather it was an urgency to express the anger and the frustrations and the hopes and the aspirations of my generation growing up in this country under the shadow of racism. (Caesar: 62)

In the same interview Johnson goes on to explain how he started working with percussion, voice, and reggae because he felt that poetic language, filtered through them, better expressed his everyday experience. As these examples demonstrate, sonic, visual, theatrical and social devices were not introduced because poets thought they would be entertaining or valuable *in themselves*, but in order to validate specific poetic and cultural traditions which provided poets with both the foundation and means to express their political visions and demands.

One might counter this argument by saying that all poetry – not only political work – is originally oral; and that therefore I should not ‘appropriate’ stylistic devices to purely political performance poetry. I agree that poetry was originally oral. However, I would suggest that this tradition had almost died out in the dominant cultures of the North Atlantic region until oral traditions from other cultures resuscitated it. Where white performance poets responded to the revival of orality, they often did so from an equally politically committed position. Therefore, my argument remains valid: the performance of poetry as we know it today is historically bound up with the consciousness of the poet’s position within his social and political surroundings, and with political demands that are the results of her/his position or self-positioning.³

Before I return to my analysis of Wright’s and Sissay’s arguments I want to go somewhat deeper into the definition of poetry performance. Luke Wright suggests that performance is a value in itself; Lemn Sissay argues that it is not. In fact, he is critical of the term performance, which he associates with a pretence or show. However, ‘performance’ can mean different things. In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner argues that performance can be related to *being*, *doing*, and *showing doing* (Schechner 2002). In the context of poetry performance the last of these is the most interesting. When a performer is “showing doing” in relation to social and cultural roles, then s/he stages, i.e. makes obvious, the patterns that inform our performance of social and cultural roles. Moreover, according to Henry

3. I differentiate between the poetry reading and performance poetry. My argument is that the poetry reading mobilizes the voice of the poet primarily as a reading, not as a speaking, voice. Also, it does not mobilize the sonic, theatrical and musical elements characteristic of poetry performance.

Sayre, performance can also, fourthly, be *an enactment* of a *previously written* text (Sayre 1995). One can take Sayre literally and argue that he is referring to a written text, or one can read his statement metaphorically and apply it to a prescribed social role. In both cases, there is a risk that performance can become pretence.

Sissay's own 'performance' at the *Poetry International* debate was an excellent example of "showing doing". His seemingly chaotic 'recital' of two poems – which was accompanied by interspaced comments, stuttering, apparent indecision about which poem to recite, breaking off a poem after a few lines because he did not like the way he was reciting it, and other 'failures' – was in fact *a performance of the poetry performance*: an attempt to show what goes on in the poet when he has to perform, and to deconstruct his own authority as a poet while claiming, instead, that of a human being. Sissay's performance raised questions about the audience's expectations from the poet, about the poet's way of relating himself to the audience, and about the role that poetic language plays as a medium between the two.

The performance as an act of "showing doing" can be a powerful instrument for political struggle because it can *either* emphasize cultural practices and affirm and validate them in doing so, or stage them and, in doing so, question them. My contention is that much of the controversy about *performance* poetry hinges on what different parties mean by the term performance and what they want to use it for: as a show – or as a tool for the interrogation of social norms and/or the affirmation of cultural practices. Unfortunately the issue is hardly ever directly addressed because, I suggest, (re-)claiming the political dimension of traditional performance poetry invests the art form and its practitioners with a moral and ethical authority that even those who have an underdeveloped political agenda or none at all would regret conceding.⁴

If we admit the political and social into our definition of performance poetry, then the practice is not quite dead yet – but is definitely on its last legs. For example, one of the poems Wright performed at *Poetry International*, a piece on the riots in the Edmonton Ikea warehouse in February 2005, used elements of Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem 'Five Nights of Bleeding'. However, this borrowing fails for two reasons. Johnson's poem cannot be separated from the context of racist and social exclusion, discrimination and police violence in which the events it describes took place. Unless Wright wants to suggest that the contemporary English middle classes are subjected to analogous oppression, the poetic analogy does not

4. Or because other poetic traditions bear their social and political agendas in different ways – vide John Kinsella, in *PR 97:1*, pp.66–79 (- Ed.)

seem justified. If he wants to suggest that such oppression exists, he needs to make the case more clearly. Moreover, the poem is disconnected from its social context: analogy with 'Five Nights of Bleeding' would entail an exploration of what it means to be white, male and middle class in contemporary Britain. The poem I heard unfolds solely in the context provided by the stage and the devices that Wright considers to be defining for performance poetry. Its disconnection from social complexities turns the poem into a display of the 'madness' of *other* people who are bargain-hunting at Ikea and accidentally cause a riot in the process. The poem becomes a show without a wider purpose.

An honest commitment to a political cause makes show impossible and entertainment highly questionable. When political causes are presented by means of show, the words used turn into an instrument of persuasion and entertainment, not of empowerment. Persuasion seeks to seduce the listener into a particular position. Whether s/he has actually thought through the reasons for taking this position is not of primary importance. Entertainment is an instrument for distraction. It does not provide, nor does it invite, a focus on issues of particular importance and often times, of complexity. Competition, a basic element of Slam poetry, is counterproductive in the context of social movements because it supplants the politically much more effective practice of solidarity.⁵ For these reasons, faced with only two choices, I voted for Sissay's contention that performance poetry is dead. Given this chance to elaborate on the subject, I suggest that it might be time for poets who perform their poetry to think about whether they want to *do*, *display*, *perform a pre-written text*, or *show doing*; and whether they consider political demands and positions to be an inherent element of performance poetry or not.

References

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5. I focus here on performance poetry in the English language. In Mexican performance poetry there is also a competitive practice, *Poesía jarrocha*, which is sometimes used for political purposes.