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CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PERFORMANCE POETRY

The aim of this paper is to show the close interaction of poetry with real life, to categorize performance poetry exploring definitions given to this term, and to distinguish main forms of performance poetry that had emerged by the 1970s.

Key words: performance poetry, oral poetry, spoken-word poetry, talk poetry, sound or acoustic poetry.

Целью данной работы является показать тесное взаимодействие поэзии с реальной жизнью, классифицировать исполнение стихов, исследуя определения, приведенные к этому термину и выделить основные формы исполнения поэзии, которые возникли в 1970-х.

Ключевые слова: исполнение стихов, устная поэзия, разговорная поэзия, звуковая или акустическая поэзия.

“Performance” as employed in “performance poetry” in American poetry refers to the rich and complex poetic form in which words are used as script for spoken word performance, usually presented by the author or narrator. This genre includes the categories that have a much wider range of meanings, for example, returned poetry, oral poetry, or spoken-word poetry, talk poetry, sound or acoustic poetry. In this paper, concentrating upon the usage, interpretation and significance of performance poetry, I will outline briefly some of its major characteristics, like the usage of sound effects in performance poetry and its oral, aural and visual features. These features include the poet’s presence and the site of the performance, relationship of meaning with music, rhythm, and multimedia existence in poetry readings. Among these features the combination of multimedia existence: voice, presence, music, high-tech devices to create mood, tone and images, and meaning, phonetic intensifiers - rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition, as well as dialect, idiom, and slang in performance poetry will be discussed with examples.

In contemporary American poetry the late 20th century gives rise of the new forms of poetic readings using different features of performance and visual poetry, sound poetry, combining with sing-song poetry and rap culture. Performance poetry or “returned poetry” shows the close relationship with oral and ancient storytelling traditions and proves that poetry has always been interwoven into daily life. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show the close interaction of poetry with real life, to categorize performance poetry exploring definitions given to this term, and to distinguish main forms of performance poetry that had emerged by the 1970s.

So what is performance poetry?

Poetry is seen as an art appealing only to the intellectual groups of people, poets, scholars, and, therefore, it seems to students far from their real life. They seldom believe that their own lives are the subject of poetry. Nevertheless, there are many reasons to integrate contemporary poetry in learning language and literature. The first reason is that poems deal with contemporary universal themes, such as love or hate, beauty, loneliness, depression, existence, etc., which are familiar to students. Secondly, poems bring contexts which provide students with cultural, linguistic and literary peculiarities of source language. Additionally, students learn more about the usage

of modern language and style influenced by the new technological progress in the time of globalization. In poetry classes it is also important to study different types and forms of contemporary poetry. One more advantages of using contemporary poetry in our classes is that students are connected to poets who are currently living and which refer to topics relevant today, and with topics that currently take place. As an example I would like to use my Facebook conversation with American well known contemporary writer Rolf Ingve, who wrote following to me:

“Dear Kanykei, I am both humbled and pleased that you liked that story. What a strange life it is that my stories I wrote so long ago and so far away from you should connect with you today. Thank you so much, Rolf Yngve”.

So, all of those reasons which connect us with American contemporary poets and writers are wholesome in understanding American literature, and creating our own imaginative works and connecting poetry with today’s real world.

In contemporary American literature Paul Hoover distinguishes two types of postmodern poetry: language poetry and performance poetry (Hoover, 1994). He explains that these two relatively marginal influences of seventies have become increasingly the dominant postmodern modes (Hoover, 1994 p.35). According to Lesley Wheeler performance poets relied more on the rhetorical and philosophical expression in their poetics than performance artists, who arose from the visual art genres of painting and sculpture (2008). Like in many Avant-garde movements, in Language poetry words more important than sounds or letters; the idea was that language should dictate meaning rather than the other way around, authority of the confessional voice, poem’s lyricism and grammar. The Language poets broke sentences into disjointed phrases and broke phrases into words in order to cleanse language of corruption and banality (Burger, 1984).

Mainly, postmodern free verse poetry includes performance poetry, language poetry and avant-garde forms of visual or concrete poetry, mass media poetry and prose poetry. Language poetry emphasizes textuality, and performance poetry is not interested “poem as poem,” but rather in using the words in script for spoken word performance (Hoover, 1994 p.35). This quality, using the words in script for spoken word performance, may lead

to distinguish the various forms of performance poetry: experimental poetry, “returned poetry”, spoken word poetry, talk poetry, sound poetry and mass media poetry.

Performance poetry or “returned poetry” shows the close relationship with oral and ancient storytelling traditions. Experimental or postmodern poetry proves that poems are more than words. Mass media poetry shows the close interaction of poetry with real life, and proves that poetry has always been interwoven into daily life. Sound poetry is a subcategory of performance poetry that emphasizes the sounds that make up words rather than the actual words themselves.

As Hoover stated the growing importance of performance as an area of conceptual art, performance poetry appeared as a new form of conceptual art (Hoover 18). Conceptual art is art in which the concepts or ideas involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. In conceptual art any of various art forms in which the idea for a work of art is considered more important than the finished product.

According to the studies performance poetry means reading or declaiming poetry in a way that acknowledges the presence of an audience. As A. F. Harold states performance poetry is “doing things with words for adults and children that are not normal (words)”. Harold has been working as a performance poet since the early years of his life. His work as a performance poet was reviewed by Jane Draycott, British poet with a particular interest in sound art and performance poetry. Over the past decades, the poetry performance has developed into an increasingly popular, diverse, and complex art form in Anglo-American literature. In theoretical and critical discourse, it is referred to as performance poetry or spoken word poetry. Some theorists argue that it is an independent poetic genre, but others treat it as a contemporary manifestation of oral poetry or of the poetry recital. According to Martina Pfeiler in the 1970s, performance art often used spoken word poetry as an integral part of avant-garde performances. Pfeiler states that feminist poetry in the 1970s used performances of poetry in order to achieve a visibility of their concerns in what they view as a patriarchal society, which continues to be an issue in the 21st century (2003).

Since there are many different definitions of performance poetry, I would like to point out Cornelia Grabner’s definition, who states that “performance poetry uses the stage as the page, transforming poetry readings into theatrical

events” (Grabner 2008). According to her research performance poetry, as a reaction against mainstream, print-based poetry, developed mainly as a form of protest and rebellion. The main focus of performance poetry is to go back to the classic role of the poet, reciting notable happenings, emotions, and perceptions. But contemporary performance poetry uses experimental rhythms as a means to engage an audience in the listening experience.

American literary critic Richard Poirier states that performance is “an energy in motion, an energy which is its own shape” (Poirier 1992, xv). It means that in performance poetry this energy is made up of sounds, body movements, gesticulations, eye-contact, visual images (e.g. of the setting, graphics, videos, as well as of the poem itself in the mind of the performer and as the audience), and feelings occurred by the rhythm. However, in the performance poetry, as Poirier states, “the work, once performed, disappears forever.” (Poirier 1992). Theoretically this energy is in motion until the performance is over; yet even long after the performance has ended, this energy sticks in the minds of the audience and the poet in the form of memories.

The major characteristics of performance poetry

So, how is performance poetry different from other types of writing?

1. The first thing to emphasize is that, like all forms of poetry, performance poetry is written for its evocative qualities - those qualities that produce an emotional response in the reader, aesthetic effect or create an experience. The first feature of performance poetry is the use of the devices which produce sound effects. Sound is the major feature of performance poetry. Sound poems are written to sound beautifully, to tell a story or to share a message. They can have alternative meaning, and they can share a feeling or experience. But the main difference between sound poetry and other forms of poetry is the attention the poet pays to sound effects, including structure, form, tone, word choice and all of those things that create the sound effect the poet is trying to achieve. According to studies sound poetry is a form of poetry, related to visual poetry that emphasizes the sounds that make up words rather than the actual words themselves. A sound poem uses an arrangement of phonetic sounds to create a musical tone and rhythm. Although its text can be written, sound poems are meant to be “performed,” spoken publicly by the poet. In written form, sound poetry contains letters and

sounds that seem like words but are not. Like words, the sounds have consonants and vowels. The arrangement also uses poetic devices like alliteration, rhyme and repetition. Luke Wright, British poet, emphasizing acoustic quality of performance poetry, 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” (Wright).

In performance poetry sound and other phonetic intensifiers function as part of the poem because they are important to the creation of meaning of the poem. From this perspective performance poetry is interactive and alive.

2. The second characteristic of performance poetry is using elements that appeal to the other types of poetry, like oral, aural and visual. This includes music, rhythm, recordings or imitations of nonverbal sounds, smells, and other perceptions of the senses. In poetry performance, the repetitive-ness of the rhythm and rhyme allow improvisation, memorization, and impact on audience and also keeps from possible interjections from the audience. The emphasis on the voice encourages the listener to focus on the voice’s tone, intonation, inflection, timbre and tonality, volume and pause. These are the most common features of the voice of a speaking person; in poetry these features are created consciously to produce aesthetic and sound effect. Poets have many tools that they can use to create their sound effects. When we hear sound we associate different feelings and emotions with them. When words are spoken aloud, they have lots of great sound qualities that poets can incorporate into their poems.

We take the following extract as an example, an English version of the Senecan Indian ceremony poem called “The Animals are Coming” from his collection of Poems for the Mystic Animals, translated from Indian North Americans. Rothenberg used this poem for the performance, which is originally used as a ceremony by the medicine society for calling guardians of the Senecan people, mystical animals (Rothenberg 1982)

Basically, this is a translated poem, but Rothenberg explains that “translations themselves may create new forms and shapes-of-forms with their own energies and interests” (1982). This translation gives the root to the development of Rothenberg model of writing performance poetry, and it became “an expansion and invention for his own time and place” (Rothenberg 1972). This

implies that by translating the sounds of the original, Rothenberg creates a poem of his own, which requires the work of a poet in the first place, and only in the second place the skills of a translator. As Rothenberg puts it as, “all poetry, all poets’ work, where poetry and music haven’t been separated” (Rothenberg 1972).

3. The third feature of performance poetry is emphasizing the combination of multimedia existence: voice, presence, music, high-tech devices, and meaning. The most obvious feature of performance poetry is the poet’s presence on the site of the performance. It has a close relationship with audience and community. Usually the author knows his/her audience, the exact topic of discussion and community needs. One of the representatives of the American performance poetry which emphasized multimedia qualities is Laurie Anderson. The nature of her poetry, as Martina Pfeiler points out, is “in her ability of making use of various genres and blending them with various acoustic, visual and other expressive media of the performing arts” (135). What makes Laurie Anderson’s poems to be performance is her ability to use her multimedia background: using her own voice, using different objectives in the performance, as Laurie define own poems “high-tech opera”, in which she performs multicultural cast of several musicians and artists in front of a live audience. All these aspects may be discussed in her poem “White Lily”.

What Fassbinder is it?

The one-armed man walks into a flower shop and says:

What flower expresses days go by
And they just keep going by endlessly
Pulling you into the future.

Days go by
Endlessly
Endlessly pulling you into the future.
And the florist says:

White Lily.

The performance of this poems starts with a setting where electric sounds of a melody played on a keyboard, and strikes of a clock tower. The important elements of this poetry film production are its sound, color, moving images and light/shadows which help to produce its impact on the recipients and audience. The author, dressed in a white suit, but with black shadow (white versus black) walks backwards. This poem is created with the intention of a multimedia performance, achieves its full dramatic realization only in performance, which reveals the basic meaning of

the poem visually, verbally, and in action. Though the poem can exist on the written page, or as a sound file, the poem is complete only in its multimedia existence, voice, presence, music, and meaning.

4. The fourth feature of performance poetry is emphasizing on the meaning and using poetry as a tool in struggling of the people in society, for instance, struggling against political issues, injustice and discrimination. Performance poetry was used as a tool to reach more people and share experiences in the development of social and political changes. In performance poetry the combination of rhythm, rhyme, and cadence resonates well with the recipients, this quality makes performance poetry more than traditional poetry. Through the poem “Black Art” by Amiri Baraka we may define performance poetry as a movement that incorporates cultural identity. It shows that poetry should not only be an art-form, but be a weapon against the struggles of the people society, a protest poem:

“We want poems that kill

Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns

Poems that wrestle cops into allies and take their weapons”

(Black Art – Amiri Baraka, Performed in 1985)

5. The fifth feature is in its connection with oral poetry. Obviously, poetry is derived from oral traditions when poems were previously written for performance. As Hoover stated, “If language poetry seeks to invent a future through the written text, performance poetry bears nostalgia for a more perfect past when orality was primary” (38). This quality shows that performance poetry is not purely a postmodern phenomenon. It begins with the performance of oral poems in ancient times, especially in oral literature. John Holcombe describing its connection with oral poetry, states that sound-patterning is a feature of the great majority of poems, and only in the last few centuries have readers become accustomed to silently reading a printed text. Some of the great epic poems from around the world are written from oral narratives, for example, Kyrgyz epic “Manas”, which is performed by manaschy - narrator of the epic, was created only for performance. The combination of voice, timbre, gesticulations, mimics, diction, phonetic devices – alliterations, assonance, music and other sound effects make this genre unique and appealing. These epic poems were transmitted orally from performer to performer and were constructed using devices such as repetition, alliteration, rhyme, to make performance more powerful and

to facilitate recall and memorization. Usually the performer of a poem composes it from memory, using the version and changing or adding some other parts of the poem. All these qualities of oral poetry preserved in the new postmodern forms of performance but extending it with new technological or cultural peculiarities. What distinguishes sound poetry from oral poetry and epic narratives in a fundamental way is that usually its sounds have no meaning in any traditional sense. In most cases, the sounds in performance poetry are not always “words” but only sounds arranged in a pattern.

6. The sixth feature of performance poetry emphasizes the phonetic intensifiers as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition, etc. These devices are very important in creating the impact on recipients and to produce emotional response. Explaining the purpose of using phonetic devices in a poem, like, “a sound poem uses an arrangement of phonetic sounds to create a musical tone and rhythm”, David Rothman states that,

“For the purest poetry the meaning of verse is the beauty of music, perceived through a pronunciation that requires no diacritical (and therefore graphic) artifice. The metaphorical ‘music’ of verse structure was once indeed music.” (Rothman)

Among these poetic devices rhyme is the most important in creating sound effects. Poets also use rhyme, internal rhymes, across a poem to give an impression of isolation or dissolution, depression or alienation.

When people aren’t asking questions
They’re making suggestions
And when they’re not doing one of those
They’re either looking over your shoulder or
stepping on your toes
And then as if that weren’t enough to annoy
you

They employ you. (from “More About People”
by Ogden Nash, 1941)

One more poetic device, repetition is often used in creating sound poems. For example, D.H. Lawrence uses repetitive sarcasm as a principle in his short poem “The English are So Nice.” His repetitions would become monotonous if not for their obvious intent. He beats the reader half to death by repeating the words nice, nicer, or nicest no fewer than 17 times in a mere 22 lines. We will consider the first six lines.

The English are so nice
So awfully nice
They are nicest people in the world

And what's more, they're very nice about being nice

About your being as well!

If you're not nice they soon make you feel it.

7. The seventh important characteristic of performance poems is the use of dialect, idiom, slang, a socio-critical content, a multimedia texture, musical rhythm, and clarity of diction. These qualities were explored in Martina Pfeiler's research on sound poetry: of contemporary American performance poets. According to Pfeiler the poet and the recipient may interact in many ways, for example, during the performance the poet may address audience personally and making

them co-creators of the poem, and participating in poetry slams that depends on direct audience reactions. This explains why slam poets perform entertaining, political or controversial texts or poems for specific events that are emotionally stirring.

Benjamin Zephaniah, English writer and poet using dialect, jargon and slang words like dis, de, dat, fe tries to show the close connection of everyday speech and poetry language and to make a deeper effect on the readers in his poem 'Dis poetry'. He describes performance poetry as "a poetry designed for ranting; needing ears for hearing it and eyes to look at it"

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