Performance Poetry Bridging the Gap: Reawakening Participation in and Appreciation of Poetics

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Poetry is essential to life; it is intrinsic. In “On Fairy Stories” from Tree and Leaf, J.R.R. Tolkien states, “The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval” (48). In other words, consciousness, language, and poetry are coeval; no one can exist on its own and no two can exist without the third. They came into existence simultaneously. Owen Barfield, a contemporary and friend of Tolkien’s, agrees. In an excerpt from Poetic Diction included in A Barfield Reader, edited by G.B. Tennyson, Barfield states, “The farther back language as a whole is traced, the more poetical and animated do its sources appear, until it seems at last to dissolve into a kind of mist of myth” (77). One of my literature professors says, in the beginning language was entirely metaphorical; it has only developed literal expressions through evolution and the development of consciousness.

There is a consensus on Tolkien’s point among many writers. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in Understanding Poetry, say, “Poetry has existed from the time of the emergence of the human race from shadowy prehistory and has survived, in one form or another, in every society since that time…it does spring from deep human impulses and does fulfill human needs” (1). Eavan Boland in her book, Becoming a Woman Poet: A Journey with Two Maps, says, “Poetry begins where language starts” (xii). In Poet’s Choice Edward Hirsch says, “Poetry is as ancient as the drawing of a horse…or an Egyptian hieroglyphic” (xiv). Hirsch notes, “There has never been a civilization without it…It is a living thing that comes from the body, from the heart and lungs, and thus seems hardwired into us…Poetry is a necessary part of our planet” (xv).
In order for us to appreciate poetry there needs to be a refocusing toward philology, linguistics, and the inheritance of meaning. According to Barfield this appreciation relies on “a felt change of consciousness” (78). He explains:

Appreciation takes place at the actual moment of change. It is not simply that the poet enables me to see with his eyes, and so to apprehend a larger and fuller world. He may indeed do this…but…it depends on the change itself…So it is with the poetic mood, which…is kindled by the passage from one plane of consciousness to another. (78-79)

Many people do not see the value of poetry; they don’t know that it is intrinsic to life and to language. The problem has become how to bring them to this awareness, how to draw them into poetry.

Elizabeth Hun Schmidt, editor of The Poets Laureate Anthology, says “Humans respond to figurative language” (Schmidt xlvi). Language, particularly poetry, which is foundational to language and communication, has incredible power. Language can make you feel a specific way; if anyone has ever said something to you that made you laugh, cry, fume, puzzle, or reflect, you have felt the power of language. If you’ve ever said something that caused someone else to react in any of those ways, you have wielded the power of language. My guess is this has happened many times, often unconsciously. W. H. Auden recognizes the power of language, as quoted by Hirsch, “Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, describe every conceivable kind of event” (11).

Though there is a great deal of poetry that doesn’t fit the theatricality of performance, it deserves no less attention and study. But if we cannot reach people through
Performance poetry meant to be read, we may be able to reach them through poetry meant to be heard. Poetry, by its nature, is a vocal art form, an oral tradition by which history, mythology, culture, and stories were shared and documented. Robert Pinsky, quoted by Schmidt, conurs: “The ultimate medium is one person’s voice. Poetry is a vocal art” (152). Bob Holman, in his invocation to Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café, says the tradition of poetry “has no home but your ear” (1). The association of poetry with something written down and read silently only came about after the printing press. Before the printing press poetry was always composed to be performed. For example, kings and queens would employ a poet at court to entertain courtiers, nobles, and royalty with their performances.

Performance poetry as it exists today – in many forms, but most often associated with Slam poetry – reincorporates these roots in its composition and presentation. This restoration of its roots is also intrinsic to poetry: “The very fact that his rhythms have high poetic value should now suggest to us that the poet, while creating anew, is likely to be in a sense restoring something old” (Barfield 78). Billy Collins, in his foreword to The Poets Laureate Anthology, says, “Literature not only progresses, but it recedes; it moves forward toward an unknown future, but it also backpedals toward its origins…Like the lordly Hudson, poetry flows in both directions” (xl).

Performance poetry can shoulder the task of reaching alienated audiences, particularly in the form of Slam, because it is more accessible than the poetry presented in “the stuffy halls of academia.” Performance poetry breathes life back into the words immobilized by the page. It bridges the gap between the academic and the secular consumption of poetry. Another style of performance poetry, in addition to Slam, that is more accessible for laymen and the general populace than that presented by the academy, according to Dr. Jessica Parker, a literature
professor at Metropolitan State College/University of Denver, is rap, or hip hop. Holman shouts this: “RAP IS POETRY—and its spoken essence is central to the popularization of poetry. Rap is taking its place, aloud, as a new poetic form, with ancient griot roots. Hip hop is a cultural throughline for the Oral Tradition” (1-2). Holman notes both the importance of rap and hip hop, along with slam, in bringing more interest and awareness to poetry, as well as the roots of all three in Oral Tradition. Rap and hip hop are poetry performed to music. In fact all song lyrics are poetry. In that sense, everyone consumes much more poetry than they think they do! I don’t know anyone who doesn’t listen to and enjoy music. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t know the lyrics to at least one song by heart. Most people don’t associate song lyrics with poetry, and by extension don’t realize that there is poetry they can relate to and understand without academic instruction.

The stereotypical academic poems Americans are exposed to in high school could be made more accessible by reading them aloud, by performing them. The point of movements like Slam is to make poetry live, make it enjoyable, accessible, and memorable. Performance poetry or not, any poem read aloud has the potential to open the door to poetry to someone new. Similarly, any poems traditionally associated with academia, if set to music, could reach a wider audience. Unwoman, a solo artist who sings and plays the cello, composed music to accompany the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay for one of her CDs. British band Mumford & Sons drew from Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing for their song “Sigh No More.”

In The Language of Life, Bill Moyers says:

No less a literary figure than Adrienne Rich has worried aloud about poetry’s banishment to the margins, “hoarded inside the schools, inside the universities.” She sees this exile as a form of censorship that “goes hand in hand with an
attitude about politics, which is that the average citizen, the regular American, can’t understand poetry and also can’t understand politics, that both are somehow the realms of experts.” Readings are returning poetry to the people…in the reading and hearing of it poet and audience are fused. Strangers converge but community emerges…what occurs at poetry readings is communion. (xii-xiii)

The prospect of bridging the gap between academic and secular consumption of poetry, drew me to styles such as Slam, which is why I chose to study it in depth this semester. Poetry is my chosen genre for writing. I have been writing poetry since I was in grade school and will never stop writing it. I struggled with the dismissal of poetry I experienced from peers, teachers, friends, and acquaintances. I have spent weeks worth of breath trying to illustrate the importance of poetry and its inherence to language, history, consciousness, and our perception of reality. Not many people wanted to listen, and of those who did, not many grasped what I was trying to say. But, as Barfield says, “Without the continued existence of poetry, without a steady influx of new meaning into language, even the knowledge and wisdom which poetry herself has given in the past must wither away into a species of mechanical calculation. Great poetry is the progressive incarnation of life in consciousness” (81). Performance poetry, I believe, can draw those people to poetry so that they might discover its value and importance on their own.

* * *

Various sources define Performance, Slam, and Spoken Word poetry in different ways. After reading many definitions and attending performance and slam events, I have determined that Performance and Spoken Word are often used interchangeably, though the latter appears to
incorporate less theatricality than the former. Zoe Anglesey, editor of *Listen Up!: Spoken Word Poetry*, says, “Understandably, physical motion, expressive body language, stance, or gesture is an indelible part of spoken word performance...[it] often keeps a beat; it accentuates rhythms to move a narrative, and strikes syllabic accents to accentuate the music of a piece or an outrageous punch line” (xvii).

Slam is a style of performance poetry which almost always manifests as a competition. These poetry competitions are governed by rules such as anyone is welcome to participate (Slam culture prides itself on its inclusive nature), there are a limited number of slots each night and participants must sign up prior to the slam, judges are picked prior to the start of each slam, judges score each performance on a ten point scale (though this scale may vary from slam to slam), each poem must be performed in three minutes or less, and exceeding the time limit results in loss of points. Slams usually have three rounds and the winner receives a prize.

Poetry that is strictly performance, not slam, does not function as a competition and is not governed by points. Most people involved in Slam poetry claim that, though they do function on a point system for competitions, the points are arbitrary. In *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word*, Marc Smith, founder of the “poetry slam,” says an important part of the slam is its focus on the poetry, as illustrated by Allan Wolf, a slam poet and organizer from North Carolina, who started each slam event with this reminder: “The points are not the point. The point is poetry.” Many slam masters and slam events around the world have adopted this mantra (10). Slam master/MC Bianca Mikahn begins each slam at The Mercury Café this way. Smith echoes Wolf’s adage: “Competing in a poetry slam is not about getting the highest score, walking away with a pocketful of cash, or trying to fill a trophy case.
The true goal is to inspire people from all walks of life to listen to poetry, appreciate and respect its power” (10).

In a similar vein, the prizes are usually small, a perk, but nothing extravagant. I have attended slams where the prize was a ten dollar gift certificate or ten dollars in cash. In the introduction to *Burning Down the House: Selected Poems from the Nuyorican Poets Café National Slam Champions*, Bob Holman says the National Poetry Slam occurs “once a year… [and] poets…rehearse together, write group poems, raise communal funds, and become a “team”…and travel to the Nationals to try to capture the flag and bring home the bacon ($2000 for First Place, or $500/poet, which usually covers travel costs)” (i). Tony Medina, in his introduction to *Bum Rush the Page*, says poetry is cheapened by the slam because it is all about the money and prestige, not the poetry (xix). Devan Kingsford, a student at Metropolitan State College/University of Denver, and a member of the group with whom I most frequently attended slams this semester, says “Slam turns poesies into pandering.” But Holman’s observation refutes this. Poets who don’t win don’t make any money. Poets who do win don’t make any profit; they just break even.

Nonetheless, Medina brings up a good point. Some people, competing poets included, put too much stock in the points, care too much about the prize, and care too little about the poetry itself. Some people like Kingsford, who has been a judge for slams in Denver, dislikes slam poetry because of this dependence on points, because a great number of the poems are the same, and because quality of content is often abandoned for sound and rhythm alone. Kingsford says more craft needs to be incorporated in slam poets’ composition of their poetry; they shouldn’t be “throwing together meaningless phrases that sound good when said aloud.” Judges
at slams award points based on subject matter more often than craft it seems. Kingsford endures a chorus of boos every time he judges because he listens for craft.

But Slam Masters, though they appreciate craft, also recognize how difficult it is for people to stand on a stage in front of strangers as well as friends and bare their souls, share their writing. Slam Masters encourage poets, good and bad alike, to keep writing and keep sharing because it is an important and essential experience of life.

Still, it is necessary to be aware of what the critiques have to say. Like any art form, there is always room for improvement. Medina says:

> Any poet worth his or her weight in syllables and words uses poetry for certain reasons…But what appears in many of the so-called new American poetry anthologies are the usual lot of dry poets shitted out of the bowels of Ivy League schools and other stamp-of-approval institutions designed to stamp out creativity and promote mediocrity. They deliberately exclude socially responsible poetry that speaks for and to a generation that did not benefit from the reforms gained by the Civil Rights Movement or the riches of the so-called New Economy. They ignore poets who could care less about being the kind of poet who in neatly polished poem after neatly polished poem perpetrates a fraud on reality.

(Medina xx)

Yet this same critique has been aimed back at some styles of performance poetry, particularly Slam, by critics like Kingsford. Kingsford says slam is “a style masquerading as a genre. It’s as though someone wrote a villanelle and said, ‘This isn’t poetry anymore, it’s villanelle poetry, which is totally different than regular poetry.’” As I noted earlier, Slam is a style of Performance Poetry, though some critics, poets, and audiences insist it is a genre. “Slam poetry
has grown stagnant, formulaic. It addresses the same topics, in the same tone of voice. ‘Slam Voice,’” says Kingsford.

Teacher and performance poet Dr. Helen Gregory, in her article “(Re)presenting Ourselves: Art, Identity, and Status in U.K. Poetry Slam,” conducted for her doctorate, illustrates this same point. She encountered critiques of U.S. Slam’s tendency to be formulaic. Her research found that it was “viewed as inauthentic and lacking in artistic validity” (6). American slam poets “accelerate to this almost insincere, tearful, pained over-emoting. And the first time or two that you see it, it’s like “Wow. Wow. That’s really amazing. They really feel what it is that they’re doing.” And when you’ve seen it a hundred times you realize it’s just a thing. It’s just a device” (6). After too many encounters with this sort of device, it can lose its power.

Regarding Slam in the U.K., one British participant of her study said, “It’s not just a showy poem done in an oratory style with some passion about what it’s like to be gay, Jewish, black, of mixed heritage etcetera that will win the day” (6). The topics I and my fellow slam attendees encountered the most included racism, sexism, homosexuality, others forms of prejudice (including hate crimes), abuse (physical, sexual, and verbal), and depression. Even the poetry I composed for this thesis deals with some of these topics. They permeate Slam culture, at least in the United States.

Kingsford characterizes a typical slam performance:

   every slam poem starts the same: punchy, short sentence that may or may not have anything to do with the topic at hand…to jump to their next random metaphor…You have three minutes, and it’s your job as the poet to cram as many metaphors and cool words as you can into it… [which] leads to contradicting
metaphors, murky themes, and excessive pejoratives, but hey! At least you got to use that esoteric word you’ve been sitting on for weeks.

In other words, a great number of poets who participate in slams fail to develop their unique voice. They default to the voice, tone, rhythm, diction, content, and performance style most prevalent in the existing body of Slam Poetry.

There are good reasons for some of the aspects Kingsford critiques, though. For example, though the three minute time frame can lead to a rushed poem, it can still benefit all the poets and the audience. Without a time limit, one poet could recite for hours and usurp the chance for other poets to present their work. Furthermore, though three minutes can hinder the development of a good poem, it also curbs the lengthiness of a bad poem. Therefore, the time limit that Kingsford dislikes means he doesn’t have to endure the poorly composed poetry for too long.

Gregory’s research found that many critics think the development of U.S. Slam has been detrimental in “its dominance over the wider performance poetry scene.” The conclusion is that “the U.K.’s divergence from the U.S. slam model means that British slam participants may be able to avoid some of the less “palatable” features that they view as having accompanied the development of slam in the U.S.” (8). Along these same lines, it seems to be the “entertaining nature of slam” that is responsible for “‘cheapening’ poetry, encouraging the production of work that lacks depth and has questionable artistic value” (8).

Although I understand and sympathize with many of these critiques, I think it is detrimental to the evolution of Slam to apply this diagnosis across the board. Despite some of the “less palatable features” present in U.S. slam, I have read, heard, and watched several poems that were composed with craft, that expressed old ideas in new ways, and made me fall in love
with poetry all over again. It is also important to remember that Slam is a style of Performance Poetry. Though Slam has its faults, those faults should not be overextended as faults of the overarching genre of Performance.