

SPOKEN POETRY: THE RULES OF SOCIAL DISCONTENT

RADU ANDRIESCU

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze the relative success of spoken poetry in the last decades. Poetry slams have become venues that attract more and more young talented people, larger audiences and the interest of the media. This should make us reconsider the role of poetry in the present cultural and social environment. I will insist on the importance of form and conventions in generating social networks that helped transform a marginal genre into a phenomenon most appealing to the young people as well as a financial success story.

Keywords: *spoken word, slam, performance poetry*

0. Can some forms of poetry still address large live audiences? In the case of our culture, only one example comes to my mind, Chris Tanasescu's project, Margento. Tanasescu performed with Margento at a number of fringe festivals: in Buxton, England (where he received the Fringiest Event Award in 2005), in Berlin (where he was a finalist in 2009) or Adelaide (Press Award, 2006). Such a poet is charismatic enough to bring together an artist who paints large canvases in front of the public, musicians, and sometimes a great voice connected to the underground musical world of jazz – Maria Răducanu. Nevertheless, this is only an isolated example, in a poetic landscape that has as its main outlet the shrinking shelves of a few bookstores, or virtual literary clubs with less and less contributors and readers.

A few decades ago, the answer to this question would have been Maiakovski, reciting his poems on a stadium. This is what Andrey Voznesensky (2012) wrote about Maiakovski's stadium reading:

On November 30th, 1962, for the first time in history, poetry came out to Luzhniki Stadium. It was the birthday of stadium poetry. I remember how difficult it was to win the audience of this hall, quite unadjusted for poetry

reading and with unadjusted microphones. Yevtushenko was not there on that day.

But Maiakovski was not only the self-dubbed “Communist futurist” of the 1920s. He was also a propagandistic agitator, and it is in this context that his stadium reading should be considered. Of course, we had our own “national bard”, Adrian Păunescu, who managed to gather hysteric crowds in the 70s and 80s around his own cultural project, Flacăra, readily making the necessary political compromises.

This paper, however, is an attempt to analyze the relative success of spoken poetry in the last decades. Poetry slams have become venues that attract more and more young talented people, larger audiences (made sometimes also of young, talented people) and the interest of the media. This should make us reconsider the role of poetry in the present cultural and social environment. I will insist on the importance of form and conventions in generating social networks that helped transform a marginal genre into a phenomenon most appealing to the young people as well as a financial success story, even when it comes to the most competitive pay TV channel in the U.S., HBO.

1. Spoken word, performance poetry, slam

First of all, are “spoken word,” “performance poetry” and “slam” terms that denote the same reality? Most of the time, they are used interchangeably, which is understandable to a certain extent. There are similarities between the realities they denote. However, it is good to bear in mind some distinctions.

“Spoken word”, when used within poetry circles, refers to the oral performance of poetry or prose pieces. “The term has been used for several decades; however, it has become more popular with the rise of performance poetry, following the success of slam in the last decades of the twentieth century” (Gregory 61). In time, these forms have become increasingly associated with each other. As for the spoken word poets, they consider themselves performance poets, rather than poets who happen to recite their work on stage. However, some of the best spoken word poets still hold a copy of their poem in their hands, on stage. It is the case of Suheir Hammad, an amazingly charismatic poet on stage, but also a poet whose performance is also a more convincing form of recitations. Moreover, some acknowledged poets like Nikki Giovanni or Amiri Baraka are invited in very popular TV shows, such as Def Poetry, on HBO. Such poets read their texts rather than perform them, but they are also able to capture a large public’s attention with their recitation, like authentic performers.

The term “performance poetry”, on the other hand, still stands in the middle of a controversy. As shown by Helen Gregory (2012), in the early 1980s, Hedwig Gorski used the expression in *The Austin Chronicle*. Gorski wanted to make a distinction between her own works (performance poetry over music, something similar to Chris Tanasescu’s Margento project) and performance art. On the other hand, slam poets use the same term to denote poetry that is performed on slam stages. Lawrence Ferlinghetti also applied the term to the Beat poets, which he called “first performance poets.” And performances such as Ginsberg’s first reading of his poem “Howl” at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955, certainly give Ferlinghetti the right to do so. As is the case with “spoken word,” “the term ‘performance poetry’ is used within poetry communities to refer to work which is performed orally, rather than presented on the page, and which allies itself more with the conventions of slam, than with those of the ‘academic’ poetry world. In the context of performance poetry, then, performance is juxtaposed against reading, since it possesses elements of “acting and displaying,” which Stern (1991, 73-75) notes are lacking from ‘formal poetry readings’” (Gregory, 63).

However, it would be a mistake to use “performance poetry” and “slam” interchangeably. An important number of performance poets are critical of slam, and they refuse to accept a format that they see as restrictive. In contrast, slam poets do not have performances only on slam stages, and they would prefer to be seen as “performance poets” rather than “slam poets.” To try reconciliation between the two perspectives, one might say that slam is a variety of performance poetry. As for defining slam in the simplest way, a good definition can be found in Helen Gregory’s paper on “Texts in performance”:

Poetry slam is a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick. It is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is interpreted and applied in myriad ways. Definitions of slam are often contentious and, in the U.S. in particular, may be debated fiercely. At its simplest, slam is a kind of oral poetry competition in which poets perform their own work before a live audience. Slammers are scored on the quality of their writing and performance, by judges who typically are randomly selected from this audience. (Gregory, 31)

As a final remark, there is also a strong connection between performance poetry, slam, hip-hop and stand-up comedy. “This is perhaps most apparent in the HBO television series Def Poetry Jam. The series’ title references the Def Jam record label, one of the most influential rap labels in the world, and signals the involvement of Russell Simmons, a co-founder of Def Jam. Hip hop and stand-up comedy are interwoven throughout the

program. The show is hosted by MC Mos Def, and other MCs spin hip hop tracks between poets' performances" (Gregory, 65). On the other hand sometimes stand-up comedians (Cedric the Entertainer) or musicians (Jewel) or people who will end up by activating in different artistic fields (such as Kanye West, a musician, film director and fashion designer) are invited to perform, which makes sense, for a pay TV such as HBO.

To conclude, a variety of artists are now gathered around slam events, artists who are most active in different fields — music, film, dance, stand-up comedy a.s.o. — bringing to life very popular shows, capable of revitalizing poetry, a genre that became more and more marginal in an artistic landscape where image, sound and the new media make the rule. Moreover, a very dynamic artistic community is thus created, with artists who work with each other.

2. Youth slams

In the United States and the U.K., and to a lesser extent in other cultures, young people become very early aware of this way of expressing one's ideas and sharing one's experiences in public. One important reason is that educational institutions in both countries initiate or get involved in slam competitions. An example for this could be the East-Side Educational Trust in London, which runs the Westminster Poetry slams with primary school students aged nine or ten. As far as age is concerned, this is an extreme example, as most youth slam programs in the U.S. and U.K. target twelve to nineteen years old young people. Slams offer teenagers a stage as well as a way of focusing their energy creatively. Moreover, the competitive format of slams attracts them more than the traditional formats of readings and recitations. Slams for young people is an area that grows faster than the adult equivalents, and most of the participants see such events as being their final destination, in their quest for a public stage. Some teenagers may sometimes perform in adult events, but usually they limit themselves to youth slams, which are ruled by different conventions.

Nevertheless, adult and youth slams are interconnected, at different levels. For instance, adult slam poets frequently work as organizers and educators for youth slams, running writing and performance workshops in schools or in other youth groups. An example could be Nate Marshall, a Vanderbilt student now. Marshall placed as the top individual teen poet in Chicago's Louder Than a Bomb Teen Poetry Festival, probably the most important and certainly the biggest youth slam in the world, and went on to perform at the Brave New Voices national youth poetry slam featured on HBO. Besides being a poet (and a Vanderbilt student), Nate Marshall became an educator and a social organizer:

Outside of class, I do a lot of community service. One thing I started doing here that I do back home in Chicago is conducting writing workshops for inner city high schools. At first, the kids are kind of like, 'I don't know about this,' but they always end up responding really well to it. Aside from that, I'm also in a fraternity. I'm active in the Black Students Alliance. I'm active with the MOSAIC committee for multicultural recruitment. I still find time to write, to go to open mic spots in Nashville and perform. I work with Vanderbilt Spoken Word, I try to keep busy (2012).

Such social involvement gives people like Nate Marshall the possibility to use their experience for helping young people focus their energy on creative activities. This kind of work also provides many poets with a more secure and regular income than they are able to obtain through adult slam or spoken word. Young people working in this context — Nate Marshall is just one of many possible examples — are important because they can act as an interface between the worlds of slam and the academy. It is such youth slam workers that select conventions and discourses both from the world of slam and from that of the academy. As for the role — social and educational — of such programs, and the way this interaction between the two worlds benefits the young people, Helen Gregory writes:

Youth slam programmes typically have an educational focus and slam poets suggest that they are often brought into schools to spice up the curriculum, teaching old skills and subjects to students in new and exciting ways. Youth slam is thus perceived to provide the best of both worlds. (Gregory, 276)

A major difference between adult and youth slams is that “poets working in youth slam adopt a line which is more accepting of the institutions, discourses and conventions of the academy” (Gregory, 276). If many adult slam poets tend to oppose the institutionalized academic art, youth slams are generally meant to bring together a rather fringy art and more academic artistic forms, a process from which everybody involved could take advantage.

Peter Kahn, a spoken word educator from Chicago, suggests that slam gives young people “an avenue to show off essentially an academic skill, writing ... and it usually builds their academic confidence and engagement and they become better students.” (Gregory, 277) Likewise, Urban Word NYC's (2006) promotional materials state that “the poetry slam adds a competitive element to the traditional poetry reading.” (Gregory, 277) In this view, slam becomes just a slight variation from academic poetry, rather than a significant move away from it. This acceptance of dominant literary conventions also means that some features of adult slam are rejected. Peter

Kahn, for instance, is very critical of adult slams and insists on the fact that youth programs produce much higher quality work:

I do think the writing in youth slams is superior to the writing in adult slams. I think adult slams have become very much rant based, stand-up comedy based, and they become a big cliché. I think youth slams have a little bit more freshness to the writing, and I would put on the page your better youth slammers' writing, up against your better adult slammers' writing, pretty much hands down. (Gregory, 277)

Some of the limitations that are generally associated with adult slam find a solution in youth programs. For instance, the evaluation of the performances is done differently. The judges are not selected randomly from the audience, as it happens in the case of adult slams. Chris Tanasescu, already mentioned in the introduction, had the possibility to experience first-hand the limitations of such a judgment: at the 2009 edition of the Berlin slam festival, one of the most prestigious in the world, where he was one of the ten finalists, the excessively drastic evaluation of just one of the judges, randomly selected from the audience, made Margento lose one of the first positions. In youth slams, professional writers and slam poets are appointed to the role, so that both the text and the performance are more accurately judged. In other cases, the scores of the judges selected from the audience are adjusted by moderators from the Poetry Society. Sometimes judges are also supplied "with scoring guidelines which address content, writing style, team collaboration and performance" (Gregory, 278). To come back to a former example, Peter Kahn has a similar approach in Chicago, emphasizing the benefits of this system over adult slam scoring procedures:

We made it important that there is some sort of rubric involved, that stresses imagery and metaphor and aversion to cliché. While on the adult scene, my sense is a lot of the clichés are the buttons that get pushed to get audience response, 'cause if you have an audience that doesn't know anything about poetry, they're not gonna be as appreciative of a unique metaphor as they are [of] something they've heard before that they can grasp right away. (Gregory, 278)

Youth slams, with their conventions and their particular place between performance poetry as such and the restrictions that come from the academic spheres, can have and do have an important role as an educational tool. Moreover, they are often included in a more comprehensive syllabus. Slam events themselves may last for just two or three hours, but the programs can include other aspects, such as day long workshops or even series of year-round activities. Youth slams become thus only a public expression of

different types of artistic and educational endeavors, and they give the students an opportunity to show what they have worked and learned. Organizers and educators also use these moments to advertise the activity of their institutions. As a consequence, slam is not just a competition between individuals or teams. It is an event that has more enduring and broader aims. In a discussion about youth slams, the teachers themselves come into focus as important catalysts and an integral part of the program. Young Chicago Authors' site, for instance, insists on the importance of mentorship and of artists becoming educators and coordinators of workshops:

Young Chicago Authors (YCA) encourages self-expression and literacy among Chicago's youth through creative writing performance and publication. YCA provides student-centered, artist-led workshops—free to youth ages 13-19 in schools and communities. With a process that emphasizes artistic development and mentorship, YCA aims to create safe spaces where a young person's life matters. The organization and its leadership believes that through their words, young people can promote tolerance and remove barriers, transforming their lives and society. (Young Chicago Authors)

Youth slams have a function that goes beyond mere entertainment. The focus is on teaching young people new subjects and skills, and a “[p]articular emphasis is placed on slam as a way of enhancing the interest of the young people in poetry, as well as improving their creativity and literacy” (Gregory, 280). Some of the goals of youth slams and correlated activities such as workshops are “to enhance critical thinking skills, leadership and to ignite a personal commitment to growth and learning which leads to heightened in-school performance and greater interest in pursuing higher education.”¹ Youth slams are also viewed “as engaging young people who would otherwise fall through the gaps of the education system, being unwilling or unable to benefit from the ways in which literacy and other subjects are traditionally taught in the classroom” (Gregory, 281). Furthermore, slam is perceived as supplying with something which the traditional education system lacks, a different approach to understanding culture and reality, an approach that can also be appealing to youth groups that otherwise would be marginalized within the educational system. It also appears that “as visiting artists/educators educators, slam poets are able to reach students in ways which their regular teachers may be unable to.” (Gregory, 282) To conclude, poetry slam is considered by teachers as well as

¹ Urban Word NYC (2006). From the various promotional materials for the 2005-2006 program, handed to Helen Gregory by staff.

young slam participants as being a powerful tool for teaching literacy in a way that is more relevant and interesting for the students.

3. New Formalism and the spoken word

In his approach to the spoken word, Dana Gioia — an outstanding critic and one of the most important representatives of New Formalism in the recent poetry of the United States — has a totally different perspective. His interest lies not in the educational value of “oral poetry” or in any attempt to bring together slam and academic poetry. On the contrary, as a strong believer in form — which is typical of the more popular types of poetry promoted by New Formalists — and a fierce opponent of “academic poetry,” a poetry entrenched, as he claims, in campuses and which addresses only a numerically insignificant elite, Dana Gioia will underline the gap between the two. From such a vantage point, Gioia cannot perceive the possibility of building bridges between the two worlds. Formalist poetry and its spoken word counterparts (rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams and performance poetry) address the common reader (or spectator), who needs all the identifying features of such genres (rhyme, rhythm and other identifiers), while the academy and the poets it supports and advertises would be caught in the “conceptual framework” of an elitist Modernism, “even as the academy attacks and rejects Modernism.” (Gioia, 6) Here is Gioia’s own rhetorical question about the most significant event in the American poetry of the last decades and his answer, with the accent on the different varieties of oral poetry that became so popular in the recent years:

Consider the following question: What has been the most influential and unexpected event in American poetry during the past twenty years? Language Poetry? New Formalism? Critical Theory? Multiculturalism? New Narrative? Identity Poetics? These have all been significant trends, but none has been especially surprising—and all of these movements have been confined largely to the academic subculture. Oddly, the most important new trend won’t be found in what Language Poet Charles Bernstein calls “official verse culture”—the small but respectable literary network of books, journals, conferences, and university writing programs. Instead, it will be discovered in the general culture in poetic works widely covered in the mass media.

Without doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry—namely rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams, and certain overtly accessible types of what was once a defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry. These new forms of popular verse have seemingly come out of nowhere to become significant forces in American culture. (Gioia, 6-7)

It is clear that Dana Gioia judges both the different types of written poetry that gained prominence towards the end of the last century, and spoken poetry in all its forms, taking into account only the impact that such poetries have on large audiences, in a world where “radio, talking-films, television, videocassettes, computers, cellphones, satellite dishes, and the Internet”(Gioia, 6) are realities that must not be neglected — with the implication that those poets which are accepted by the academy tend to neglect them. However, Gioia also makes an important distinction. These new forms of popular verse are not representative for the best poetry of the period. Quite the contrary. Taken individually, the poems might be some of the worst possible. But taken collectively, they can play an important role in the future of poetry as a whole, not only of its spoken forms. They show that there is a permanent human need for poetry, and they can help people become reacquainted with a fading genre.

As in the case of Formalist poetry, Gioia readily criticizes the academic critics for not embracing this art form. However, as I tried to show in the previous section of this paper, more than one bridge has been laid between slam or other oral manifestations of poetry and the academy. Anyhow, Gioia’s position is paradoxical, as he would like academic critics to accept spoken poetry, whereas he himself characterizes it (or at least most of it) as being “undistinguished or worse.” Even at its best, in Gioia’s opinion this poetry is not more than “smart and lively.”(Gioia, 7)

Gioia’s approach becomes really challenging when he deals with those aspects of the new popular poetry which are, in his views, neglected by the mass media and by culture critics, who focus on the flamboyant side of this type of art and on its sociological implications. For him, the most interesting aspect is “the unusual mixture of radical innovation and unorthodox traditionalism in the structure of the work itself and the modes of its performance, transmission, and reception.”(Gioia, 8) To discuss this mixture, Gioia distinguishes four different ways in which the new popular poetry departs from the assumptions of mainstream literary culture, differences that reveal “crucial changes in American culture”:

1. “The most significant fact about the new popular poetry is that it is predominantly oral. The poet and audience usually communicate without the mediation of a text. (9)
2. “The next significant fact is that these new popular forms emerged entirely outside established literary life and were initially developed by individuals marginalized by intellectual and academic society.” (11)
3. “The third interesting feature of the new popular poetry is that it is overwhelmingly, indeed characteristically, formal.” (12)
4. “The fourth and final way in which the new popular poetry differentiates itself from mainstream poetry is the most radical way

imaginable—by attracting a huge, paying public. In a culture where high-art poetry requires state subsidy, private support, and academic subvention to survive, the new popular verse shamelessly thrives in the marketplace.” (18)

Dana Gioia discusses these four features at large, in four different sections of his essay, but for the purposes of this paper, I will insist on the third one: the fundamentally formal aspect of the new oral poetry. Moreover, as I am not particularly interested in Gioia’s demonization of “literary poetry,” I will quote just one more fragment from his essay, that shows how important form is in the different manifestations of spoken poetry:

The new popular poets [...] flamboyantly display their metrical schemes. In the aesthetic of rap, for instance, the stronger the beat, the more extravagant the rhyme, the more elaborate the pattern skillfully deployed, the better the poem. [...] The personalities of the performers need to be projected as strongly as possible, because in performance there is no absolute separation between the singer and the song, the actor and the script, or the poet and the poem. (17)

Gioia continues his demonstration by showing that what he calls “the new popular poetry” takes great delight in the formal elements that it uses, and for good reason: “overt stylization distinguishes it from ordinary speech.” This is how oral verse announces its status as art. Gioia compares this to the way in which a Modernist poem in free verse distinguishes itself from prose by certain typographical conventions such as empty space and line breaks that visually disrupt the standard page rule of the right-hand margin. In the case of spoken poetry, the role of such an artifice is “to command the special attention an audience gives to the heightened form of speech known as poetry.”(ibid.)

Secondly, Gioia argues, much of the power of oral poetry comes from the audience understanding exactly the rules the artist follows. Popular art in general “is a performance that feeds, teases, frustrates, and fulfills the expectations of the audience.” (ibid.) As a consequence, the artist has to prove that he is the master of his tools and that he is capable of using them to do something better than any member of the audience could do, surprising and delighting the audience within the boundaries of predetermined conventions.

Gioia’s final argument in favor of artifice — that is, form in poetry, be it written or oral — is memorable: “The purpose of art is not to deny artifice but to manage it so well that it appears inevitable.”(18)

4. Conclusions

In order to get across a message to a large audience, spoken poetry — or the “new popular poetry,” as dubbed by Dana Gioia — has to contain a number of identifiers, so that it becomes an “overwhelmingly, indeed characteristically, formal” type of poetry. As a result, slam poets have to observe the conventions of a certain type of poetry competition, as well as use such identifiers (meter, rhyme etc). Moreover, youth slam comes with its own set of rules and conventions (for instance the use of metaphor and the rejection of clichés), which derive from the rigors of academy. Young slam participants become thus more aware of written forms of poetry and tend to have a diversified cultural activity and a keen awareness of the many possible ways of expressing one’s ideas, feelings and beliefs poetically. The gap between academy and “oral poetry” is thus reduced and they both help create social and cultural networks that young people need to (re)structure their ideas, possible misconceptions and behavior.

On the other hand, creating stronger bridges between youth slam and academy does not mean necessarily that there is an increasing gap between adult slam and youth slam. On the contrary, someone like Nate Marshall, given as an example in this paper, shows an understanding of all these milieus and is capable of performing on adult slam stages as well as acting as an educator and coordinator of youth slam programs.

In fact, giving both spoken word and written word poets the possibility to get involved in school and university programs solves more than one problem: it creates an institutional core around which individual writers and good ideas — that sometimes get lost because of lack of cohesion — can coagulate, bringing to life a more active and socially aware literary community; it also offers poets an income and the possibility to be active in a field where their particular talents become an important educational resource; it also offers many young people a non-violent means of expressing their anger, their frustrations and to share their stories with others.

For many reasons — lack of tradition, lack of involvement of the educational system, almost total lack of active poets interested in spoken poetry — such programs cannot be implemented in Romania. The only remarkable Romanian poet who successfully took part in international slams, Chris Tanasescu, is still seen by more conservative critics as a deviation from the norm.

I will end by quoting two young Romanian poets. These quotes may help the reader of these lines understand what the place of spoken poetry is in our country, at this point. In a recent e-mail exchange about spoken poetry with one of the most talented younger Romanian poets, Dan Sociu, a recipient of the Writers’ Union Award (the youngest poet ever to win this

most prestigious award), I encountered the kind of educated skepticism that is a preferable variant to the more common a priori rejection of this form. Here is Dan Sociu's answer: "...I don't know what to say, I'm a fan of printed poetry, I like to see the lines, to read them in my own rhythm, and the art of poetry is something different from acting, there is too much silence and isolation; there is also another important thing, when I am in front of an audience it's hard for me to show my feelings, it's as if I'd take off my clothes. I get emotional in a movie house, where it is dark, and sometimes at the theater, but otherwise it's harder for me. I like to listen to recordings of some poets, Larkin's voice, for instance, that kind of British melancholy and austere sound but I don't do that too often."²

Another talented younger poet, Răzvan Țupa, recently published a long and interesting essay on spoken poetry, mentioning the only Romanian poetry slam of some consequence that ever took place: "Of course, Romania's recent history has its own example: the Tournament of the Poets show. Unfortunately, not even I, as one of the participants, can remember who the winner of the first edition was." (Țupa, 8)

Works Cited

- Gioia, Dana. *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press. 2004. Print.
- Gregory, Helen. "Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses." *eric.exeter.ac.uk*. University of Exeter, n.d. Web. 09 October 2012.
- Marshall, Nate. *admissions.vanderbilt.edu/learnmore*. Vanderbilt University, n.d. Web. 18 October 2012.
- Țupa, Răzvan. "Prezența poeziei – dincoace de text și de literatură ("The Presence of Poetry. On This Side of Text and Literature"). *Dilemateca* 72 (May 2012). 8-12. Print.
- Voznesensky, Andrey. "The Poet and the Agora." Translated by Alec Vagapov. *vagalecs.narod.ru*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 October 2012.
- Young Chicago Authors, *wbez.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 October 2012.

² My translation, from our e-mail exchange.