

The Perspective of Poetry Performance in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of the twentieth century, poets and artists in Eastern Europe in particular took up the challenge of reflecting on and investigating the instrumentalization of language for communicative and political-ideological purposes. They did so by drawing attention to the made-ness of language, its materiality and mediality, and by creating performative situations for themselves and their audiences within which possibilities of verbal expression could be tested and acted out. Poetic performance makes the limits of language and speakability tangible. This review work will enlighten us on basic steps taken by the European countries in enhancing poetry performances in and Diaspora.

Keywords: Poetry, Eastern Europe, Performance

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm [1]. Poetry is a vast subject, as old as history and older, present wherever religion is present, possibly under some definitions the primal and primary form of languages themselves [2]. Naturally, not every tradition or every local or individual variation can be or need be included, but the article illustrates by examples of poetry ranging between nursery rhyme and epic.

Poetry is the other way of using language [3]. Perhaps in some hypothetical beginning of things it was the only way of using language or simply was language tout court, prose being the derivative and younger rival. Both poetry and language are fashionably thought to have belonged to ritual in early agricultural societies; and poetry in particular, it has been claimed, arose at first in the form of magical spells recited to ensure a good harvest [4]. Whatever the truth of this hypothesis, it blurs a useful distinction: by the time there begins to be a separate class of objects called poems, recognizable as such, these objects are no longer much regarded for their possible

yam-growing properties, and such magic as they may be thought capable of has retired to do its business upon the human spirit and not directly upon the natural world outside. Formally, poetry is recognizable by its greater dependence on at least one more parameter, the line, than appears in prose composition [5]. This changes its appearance on the page; and it seems clear that people take their cue from this changed appearance, reading poetry aloud in a very different voice from their habitual voice, possibly because, as Ben Jonson said, poetry "speaketh somewhat above a mortal mouth" [6]. If, as a test of this description, people are shown poems printed as prose, it most often turns out that they will read the result as prose simply because it looks that way; which is to say that they are no longer guided in their reading by the balance and shift of the line in relation to the breath as well as the syntax [7].

In the socialist states of Eastern Europe, with all of their differences, poetry and performance are characterized by a double sub-culturality [8]. On the one hand, they undermine the conventional perception of script and words as neutral means, which, on the other hand, was unacceptable against the cultural-political

backdrop, forcing them into the unofficial or partially tolerated cultural scene.

Form in poetry

Poetic form is more flexible in modernist and post-modernist poetry and continues to be less structured than in previous literary eras [9]. Many modern poets eschew recognizable structures or forms and write in free verse. But poetry remains distinguished from prose by its form; some regard for basic formal structures of poetry will be found in even the best free verse, however much such structures may appear to have been ignored [10]. Similarly, in the best poetry written in classic styles there will be departures from strict form for emphasis or effect. Among major structural elements used in poetry are the line, the stanza or verse paragraph, and larger combinations of stanzas or lines such as cantos. Also sometimes used are broader visual presentations of words and calligraphy [11]. These basic units of poetic form are often combined into larger structures, called poetic forms or poetic modes (see the following section), as in the sonnet.

In addition to specific forms of poems, poetry is often thought of in terms of different genres and subgenres. A poetic genre is generally a tradition or classification of poetry based on the subject matter, style, or other broader literary characteristics [12]. Some commentators view genres as natural forms of literature. Others view the study of genres as the study of how different works relate and refer to other works.

Narrative poetry

Narrative poetry is a genre of poetry that tells a story. Broadly it subsumes epic poetry, but the term "narrative poetry" is often reserved for smaller works, generally with more appeal to human interest. Narrative poetry may be the oldest type of poetry [13]. Many scholars of Homer have concluded that his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed of compilations of shorter narrative poems that related individual episodes. Much narrative poetry such as Scottish and English ballads, and Baltic and Slavic heroic poems is performance poetry with roots in a preliterate oral tradition. It has

been speculated that some features that distinguish poetry from prose, such as meter, alliteration and kennings, once served as memory aids for bards who recited traditional tales [14].

Lyric poetry

Lyric poetry is a genre that, unlike epic and dramatic poetry, does not attempt to tell a story but instead is of a more personal nature [15]. Poems in this genre tend to be shorter, melodic, and contemplative. Rather than depicting characters and actions, it portrays the poet's own feelings, states of mind, and perceptions.

Epic poetry

Epic poetry is a genre of poetry, and a major form of narrative literature [16]. This genre is often defined as lengthy poems concerning events of a heroic or important nature to the culture of the time. It recounts, in a continuous narrative, the life and works of a heroic or mythological person or group of persons [17]. Examples of epic poems are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the *Nibelungenlied*, Luís de Camões' *Os Lusíadas*, the *Cantar de Mio Cid*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Mahabharata*, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*, Nizami (or Nezami)'s *Khamse* (Five Books), and the *Epic of King Gesar*. While the composition of epic poetry, and of long poems generally, became less common in the west after the early 20th century, some notable epics have continued to be written [1].

Satirical poetry

Poetry can be a powerful vehicle for satire [5]. The Romans had a strong tradition of satirical poetry, often written for political purposes. A notable example is the Roman poet Juvenal's satires. The same is true of the English satirical tradition. John Dryden (a Tory), the first Poet Laureate, produced in 1682 *Mac Flecknoe*, subtitled "A Satire on the True Blue Protestant Poet, T.S." (a reference to Thomas Shadwell) [7]. Another master of 17th-century English satirical poetry was John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester. Satirical poets outside England include Poland's Ignacy Krasicki, Azerbaijan's Sabir and Portugal's Manuel Maria Barbosa du Bocage [10].

Prose poetry

Prose poetry is a hybrid genre that shows attributes of both prose and poetry [5]. It may be indistinguishable from the micro-story (a.k.a. the "short short story", "flash fiction"). While some examples of earlier prose strike modern readers as poetic, prose poetry is commonly regarded as having originated in 19th-century France, where its practitioners included Aloysius Bertrand, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé [18]. Since the late 1980s especially, prose poetry has gained increasing popularity, with entire journals, such as *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, and *Haibun Today* devoted to that genre and its hybrids. Latin American poets of the 20th century who wrote prose poems include Octavio Paz and Giannina Braschi [9].

Writing-Reading Performance

Performance places the poetic text in a situational context of production and reception [1]. Beyond the printed word, typographic experiments evolve from a physical process of writing by hand and producing texts by typewriter, which themselves often gain the status of aesthetic objects [4]. The presentation of poetry by way of poets' readings implies a further shift from the reception of self-contained works to the perception of poetry in performance situations. Poets seek direct contact with their audience. In his performance for a video camera titled *Conversation with a Lamp*, Andrei Monastyrski, one of the founding members of the Collective Actions group, reflects on how the concept of performativity developed from poetry, retrospectively presenting Russian poets of the nineteenth and twentieth century's in the situation of a reading performance [5]. Another prominent approach by many artists and poets is the focus on freeing language from ideological usurpation. They tried to understand to which degree they themselves had unconsciously internalized ideology, for instance, as when Dmitri Prigov took on the character of a Soviet militia-man in his readings [5]. It is precisely this gesture that Pussy Riot cited in their action *The Policeman Enters the Game* in the 53rd minute of the World Cup final match on 25 July 2018, thus

radicalizing the intertwinement of poetics and politics and intervening into media space. In contrast to the meta-linguistic practices of Moscow Conceptualism, Slovak conceptualist Ľubomír Ďurček deals systematically with the contextual meanings of a single word, such as the word truth. He uses the page format as a limited model space, a performance area in miniature. Monogramist T.D's works rather emphasize intimate processes of writing, whose manipulation of figurative language changes the word into a material image or spatial object. In his early work, starting with the first Hungarian happening *The Lunch* [6], Tamás Szentjóby styled himself a 'poet at the typewriter.' For the Polish neo-avant-garde artist Andrzej Partum, postcards with provocative slogans, which he sent worldwide, were a form of postal performance examining the meaning and weight of words. Thus the addressee and his or her (often very creative) response played a key role in Partum's postal actions [7]. It was a part of the international Mail Art movement and crucial element of the Poetry Office founded by Partum in Warsaw in 1971 [8]. In the works of the artistic duo Dorota Gawęda and Eglé Kulbokaitė (Young Girl Reading Group), collective reading from mobile displays creates a unique experience of community. Yet here reading the text is not simply transferred to the performative situation; thanks to the installation, its virtual dimension is exceeded in the form of material objects strongly engaging the senses [9].

Audio Gestures

Auditory or phonic poetry can be understood as a further development of sound-poetry in that it not only involves the sound of language and the transgressive potential of the voice, but also clearly works with the technical possibilities of audio recording [10]. One of the great technological breakthroughs of the 1960s was the personal tape recorder, which meant that sounds could not just be recorded, but edited, cut, modulated, or mixed [10]. Ladislav Novák experimented with a tape recorder at home before he and other poets, such as

Josef Hiršal or Bohumila Grögerová, began collaboration with a radio studio in the north Bohemian town of Liberec in the late 1960s on a Semester of Experimental Creation, during which innovative audio compositions were aired over the course of many months [11]. In the 1980s, the activity of the Latvian artist collective NSRD (Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings), founded by Hardijs Lediņš and Juris Boiko, was characterised by the production of experimental music albums and the performance of interdisciplinary actions. In her sound compositions, Jelena Glazova, a younger artist from Riga, uses archival recordings of Latvian folk songs from 1927, preserved on wax cylinders, which she mixes with her own digitally processed voice recordings [12]. For Polish artist Wojciech Bąkowski, the noise of tape and cheap music equipment from the 1980s are objects of nostalgia, which he willingly uses in both stage performances as well as installations [12].

Interventions in Public Space

Spoken or written word in public space confronts poetry with politics and involves direct sharing of ideas within a community or interaction with accidental passers-by [6]. In the 1970s, the exhibition actions of the Zagreb-based Group of Six Artists or the public interventions of the Bosch+Bosch group from Subotica practiced what one might call poetry of immediate impact [13]. Testing the limits of freedom, they used the street as an open interactive space to replace the page of a book or conventional exhibition space. The performances of Tomislav Gotovac caused a sensation by their bringing of private things into public spaces [9]. On streets and public squares, Gotovac presented his naked body and daily tasks like cutting his hair and shaving, watching television or cleaning. The Polish artist Ewa Partum used letters made of white cardboard sold in shops to assemble slogans for the decoration of living and working spaces. She randomly scattered these letters in both urban and natural spaces, and in this way liberated them from their original meaning. She

called this series of actions Active Poetry [14]. During a street action after the defeated labour protests of 1976, the group Akademia Ruchu presented the assembled crowd with lines of poetry written on banners. The Orange Alternative, on the other hand, played with the political setting by changing one singular letter in a slogan to mock the prohibition of anti-regime banners. Contemporary artist Liliana Piskorska also creates performative acts reclaiming public space [5]. In this case, however, she deals not with the political regime, but with sexism in language, which also mounts considerable resistance. By changing male to female endings in wall graffiti, she draws attention to the need for gender-specific adaptation of Polish flexion [10]. In contemporary Russia, Pavel Arsenev and Roman Osminkin of the Laboratory of Poetic Actionism from St. Petersburg, or Kirill Medvedev, a Moscow-based poet, activist, and front man of the politically engaged rock band Arkady Kots, experiment, increasingly via social media, with methods and devices aimed at breaking out of the safe space of art to intervene directly in society [4]. Damir Avdić, a Bosnian musician, writer, and critic of post-Yugoslav social reality, works in a similar fashion.

Language Games

Since the emergence of language-based art practices in the 1960s, poetry has been taken literally as a potential field for the examination of language as such [15]. Poetry opens up a horizon for analyzing how words act in various contexts and various media. Language is often understood not only as a means of communication and its materiality, but also as a relational and dynamic field [16]. Mladen Stilinović's statements often imitate the form of slogans used in politics and marketing [4]. His chief interest is in language not as a linguistic object, but as a dynamic field for confronting ideologies. In his work, phrases taken from everyday speech are inscribed into a complex matrix of social relations. Vlado Martek's pre-poetry goes back to synergy of elementary practices and concrete materials used for writing

conventional poetry by means of tautology [11]. Honza Zamojski is an artist who creates his unique world, where pencil sketches, visual poetry and the essence of an artist's book intertwine with sculptural objects and installations, adding up to build inseparable combinations [17]. In this way, Zamojski

explores the relationship between the world closed inside the book and the architectural space of the exhibition. He builds visual and poetic narratives without avoiding absurdity, self-irony and humour; however, he is sometimes deadly serious and disturbing.

CONCLUSION

In the socialist states of Eastern Europe, with all of their differences, poetry and performance are characterized by a double subculturality: on the one hand, they undermine the conventional

perception of script and words as neutral means, which, on the other hand, was unacceptable against the cultural-political backdrop, forcing them into the unofficial or partially tolerated cultural scene.

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