

Spoken-word poetry

In the Anglo-American tradition spoken word poetry is a specific kind of poetry intended for public performance or reading on stage. This outwardly simple English term is difficult to define (or translate), as it can be understood two ways – more broadly, as spoken poetry in general, which would include all oral poetic forms – performative, experimental and jazz poetry, but also – and perhaps primarily – hip hop; and more narrowly – as a particular contemporary poetry subgenre of American provenance, closely linked to poetry slams¹ – poetry performed for an audience, usually without accessories, musical or dance accompaniment.

Spoken word poetry in the narrower sense has gained popularity in the West since the second half of the 1980s, while in Poland it remains relatively unknown to this day. Curiously, the widespread popularity of spoken word has not translated into a proliferation of scholarly work on the subject.² That is because, as I will clarify later on, spoken word poetry is by nature, in its very roots and principles, an egalitarian, highly democratic and anti-academic phenomenon, not to say anti-intellectual, and at the same time, a phenomenon of pop culture, if not mass culture. Polish writers have yet to address the subject of spoken word poetry in the contemporary sense in which it is understood here.

When spoken word poetry has appeared in academic works, it has usually been in one of two contexts. The first consists of pedagogic works and school textbooks; according to scholars interested in the subject, such as Amy Borovoy, spoken word “can be a fantastic way to engage [our classes], to bring text alive, and to encourage student voice.”³ Shiv Raj Desai and Marsh Tyson express a similar belief in the possibilities for self-knowledge and self-expression offered by the study of spoken word poetry.⁴ Spoken word poetry’s functional value in education is also a theme of Maisha T. Fisher’s *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken-word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* and Scott Herndon and Jen Weiss’s *Brave New Voice: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken-word Poetry*. Reflections on the subject of spoken word poetry also figure in studies of orality in a literary context by scholars such as Dana Gioia, following in the footsteps of thinkers including Walter J. Ong. Gregory Nagy, on the other hand, writes about slam with reference to the traditions of antiquity.

Susan Somers-Willett notes the performative nature of spoken word poetry, which distinguishes it from straightforward oral communication. She writes that such poetry’s reception involves not only hearing but, in fact, all of the senses, with the poem’s enactment becoming

¹ A poetry slam is a type of poetry contest. In the US the terms spoken word poetry and slam poetry are used interchangeably.

² More publications can be found on slam poetry, such as: *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett or *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* by Gary Mex Glazner. In the Polish context, probably the most thorough study is the book *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa. Historia slamu w Polsce 2003-2012* (The Best Poet Never Wins. A History of Slam in Poland 2003-2012), edited by Agata Kołodziej.

³ A. Borovoy, *Five-Minute Film Festival: The Power of Spoken Word Poetry*, Edutopia: What Works in Education. The George Lucas Educational Foundation, 11 April 2014.

⁴ S.R. Desai, M. Tyson, “Weaving Multiple Dialects in the Classroom Discourse: Poetry and Spoken Word as a Critical Teaching Tool”, *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 9.2 (2005), 71-90.

more important than its recitation.⁵ Somers-Willett takes the position that spoken word poetry functions both in writing and on stage. Mark Otuteye likewise argues that spoken word goes beyond its verbal-textual layer: “With spoken word [...]all that lives on the page are the lyrics. The music of the poem lives in the performer.”

Putting aside references to its clear origin in antiquity,⁶ some scholars also see certain beginnings of modern spoken word poetry in the 19th century, when public recitation of poems by performers other than the author enjoyed widespread popularity.⁷ But the most important movements that advanced the development of spoken word poetry were the Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Generation. As H. Bernard Hall writes, “[w]hile each of these movements emerged from its own historical context, both transformed popular understandings of poetry [...]”⁸

Beginnings | Harlem Renaissance is the name given to a sociocultural efflorescence of Afro-American culture (especially literature) that took place in the Harlem section of New York City in the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance, also called the New Negro Renaissance, drew inspiration primarily from music developed by black musicians, i.e., jazz and blues, and from the culture and beliefs of Afro-Americans. The Harlem Renaissance period represented the beginning of the creation of a separate, independent identity among American blacks, beyond the discourse of slavery and discrimination. The possibility of telling one’s experience out loud presented an opportunity for communicating personal, individual stories. In 1922, James Weldon Johnson was responsible for the release of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, and in 1935 *The New Negro*, an anthology edited by Alain Locke, was published: its various texts included both essays and poetry, promoting equality and resistance to social injustice.

The Beat poets, for their part, “brought the ‘fine arts’ out of the ‘Ivory Tower’ and into coffee-houses, bars, and other underground venues.”⁹ The poets of the Beat Generation lay the foundations for a movement that would question white middle-class culture. They also spread the practice of reading poetry out loud. October 7, 1955 became an important day in literary history when the Six Gallery Reading was held in San Francisco: an evening poetry reading considered to be the first public appearance of the Beats (called “beatniks” by detractors, the suffix by implication slurring them as Communist sympathizers). There, beside such authors as Philip Lamantia and Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg made his debut with the poem “Howl.”

In the 1960s a new movement was born, called Black Art, christened thus by a poet linked to the Beat Generation, Amiri Baraka (originally published as LeRoi Jones); like the Harlem Renaissance, but considerably more radical, the Black Art Movement had deep roots in the struggle for civil rights for black Americans.

⁵ S. B. A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

⁶ See M. K. Smith, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Slam Poetry*, New York: Alpha Books, 2004.

⁷ L. Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008, 6.

⁸ H. B. Hall, *Origins of Spoken-word Poetry*, <http://www.lessonpaths.com/learn/mmHosted/416178>, (last accessed: 01.03.2016).

⁹ H. B. Hall, *Origins of Spoken-word Poetry*, <http://www.lessonpaths.com/learn/mmHosted/416178>, (last accessed: 01.03.2016).

This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. [...] the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for selfdetermination and nationhood.¹⁰

This transformation of poetry and its form and the introduction of new themes had the purpose of reclaiming not only black poets' identity, but also Afro-American experience more generally, including through the use of their particular idiom and by evoking black culture and history and expanding the boundaries of black art beyond music, as well as connecting poetry with ideology. At stake was the power of self-expression, in voices other than those offered by so-called high culture, identified with the culture of the white majority. At the same time, the poetry of Afro-American authors became somehow more mainstream and accessible to a wider public. Despite developments in technology, performances in cafés continued to dominate, since publishers were reluctant to publish the work of poets affiliated with Black Arts due to their scandalous reputation or simply because their work was not recognized as a genuine form of art. Performers of that period such as Gil Scott-Heron or the collective of The Last Poets would later inspire the work of the first rappers.

The next turning-point came in approximately the mid-1980s, when the Chicago poet Marc Kelly Smith, a blue-collar worker by trade, organized the first poetry slam in the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge jazz club. A second slam was quick to follow, this time in New York at the Nuyorican Poets Café, which over time would become the most prestigious slam in the country and in the whole world. New York was then followed by San Francisco and other American cities. In 1990, Gary Mex Glazner organized the first-ever slam championships in the US, in San Francisco. In the 1990s, slam achieved increasing popularity, overseas as well.¹¹ At that point an important shift in engagement took place, as in addition to black poets, other marginalized minorities also made their poetic voices heard.

The first poetry slams were notable for their strong emphasis on social discontent and criticism of the existing situation. Voices of opposition to the current reality dominated as poets frequently expressed anger in their poems. The thematic range of poetry performed at slams in recent memory is broader, with poets often resorting to grotesque or comic subjects.

Slam in Poland, or “Come Shout at Some Poets!” | Slam made its way to Poland through the efforts of Bohdan Piasecki, who as a student of English had become aware of the phenomenon at London's Farrago Poetry Café, which had its own cult following. The first poetry slam in Poland took place on 15 March 2003 in Warsaw at the Stara ProchOFFnia. Among the poets who participated were Wojciech Cichoń, Konrad Lewandowski, Piotr Bonisławski, Anna Bartosiewicz and Jan Kapela, who was finally selected as the winner. Later, further slam evenings were organized elsewhere, in such places as Galeria Off, Fabryka Trzciny or, eventually, Plan Be. Slam quickly spread to other cities as well. With the growth of

¹⁰L. Neal, “The Black Arts Movement”, *The Drama Review* 1968, vol. 12, no. 4, 29.

¹¹It is generally accepted that the first poetry slam in Europe was held in London in 1994 at the initiative of John Paul O'Neill.

slam's popularity, its conventions were treated with increasing playfulness, as anti-slams, for example, were organized, at which the worst poems won. In 2005 the festival Spoke'N'Word was launched, drawing the best spoken word poets from around the country and abroad. It is now one of the largest events of that type in Europe.

Though poetry slams were relatively slow to come to Poland, and arrived as a borrowing – via Great Britain – from American culture, the institution was not simply transferred whole cloth to Polish soil. Polish slam does not function in some kind of void apart from other culture. As Joanna Jastrzębska has written, slam in its Polish hypostasis draws abundantly from local literary tradition.

[C]ontemporary slam is built from elements that are familiar parts of Polish literary life. Among these, in my view, we could list the eighteenth-century contests for the best poem, the improvisations performed by poets in literary salons, cabaret artistic productions, café gatherings of literary bohemia, and also public performances by members of literary circles in the interwar years. In that context, slam can be perceived as a successive link in the development of literature-related performative activity.¹²

In the eyes of Justyna Orzeł, on the other hand, Polish slam is distinguished not so much by the focus on rivalry or the figure of a particular “slamer” (Polish slang for a slam champion), as the creation of a “temporary community.” Orzeł therefore states that “Polish slam puts into practice the idea of the democratization of poetry and opens that space for contexts outside literature.”¹³

Slam has given rise to a wide range of emotions, some mutually contradictory, in Poland as elsewhere.¹⁴ As early as 2004, an enthusiastic article appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, written by Igor Stokfiszewski, in which he wrote:

Slam poetry presents a chance to prove that poetry can function in the Polish reality of the early twenty-first century as an equal partner to television, print weeklies, and computer consoles, without losing its role in the creation of culture.¹⁵

Jerzy Jarniewicz wrote an article in response to Stokfiszewski, expressing a much higher degree of skepticism; Jarniewicz reproached slam for a lack of innovation (“it has all been done long ago and much better”), commercialism, and a free-market mentality; he compared slam to boxing, where the pleasure of victory is “not so much the satisfaction of public recognition as the joy of knocking out your opponent.” He went on to add: “Slam is the quintessence of

¹²J. Jastrzębska, “(R)ewolucja performatywna zjawisk scenicznych. Od salonu do slamu” (The Performative [R] evolution in Stage Presentations. From Salon to Slam), in *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa. Historia slamu w Polsce 2003-2012* (The Best Poet Never Wins. A History of Slam in Poland 2003-2012), ed. A. Kołodziej, Kraków: Rozdzielczość Chleba, 2013, 195.

¹³J. Orzeł, “Współzależności i uzależnienia. Slam, czyli...?” (Co-dependences and Addictions. Slam, or...?), in: *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa*, 240.

¹⁴Harold Bloom pronounced slam to be “the death of art.” Lawrence Ferlinghetti (one of the original Beats) spoke in a similar tone of how slam was “killing poetry.”

¹⁵I. Stokfiszewski, “Poetry slams zdobywają coraz większą popularność” (Poetry Slams Gain Increasing Popularity), in *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa*, 19.

the culture of impatience, in which I perceive a need for [...] clear, unambiguous hierarchies.” Jarniewicz’s critique concluded with the statement that “slam, the poetry of instant gratification, is an escape from time. That brings it dangerously close to such spectacles of contemporary culture as karaoke, botox, boy bands, or bio-renewal laboratories.”¹⁶

Poetics | It is fairly obvious that spoken word poetry incorporates elements of theater. Because of that, the audience and their interaction with the poet is more important than the poet himself. At the same time, poetry slams are highly democratic – in the sense that the audience members perform the function of judges, so that slams are self-regulating, subject to internal control (although naturally a whole list of external rules are also applied, and in recent years special institutions have arisen whose purpose is to formalize slam procedures). The interaction with the audience becomes all the more important for that reason.

Spoken word poems typically possess certain traits as a result of the specific nature of this kind of poetry. Firstly, a certain length is essential – during poetry slams, poets must comply with an exact maximum limitation of three and a half minutes. Since a spoken word poem in a certain sense takes place only in the “here and now,” its form must fit into a certain unit of time, a unit bearable for the audience. The poem’s rhythm, and a certain kind of “flow,” are also important elements, although free verse, with a narrative thrust, is the prevalent form.

Spoken word poems typically have short stanzas. Among its stylistic features, metaphor dominates, and spoken word poets also tend to employ alliteration, wordplay, repetition, and shouting; there can also be singing, homophony, onomatopoeia, etc.; rhyme is used relatively rarely.

The egalitarian nature of spoken word poetry dictates that it must be relatively simple and account for the average listener’s competencies. Spoken word poems should be understandable the first time they are listened to or watched. For that reason, the subject matter of spoken word poetry is often focused on a single image or experience. Another crucial feature of spoken word poetry is that these poems often deal with important contemporary events, commenting on the existing current social reality, of pressing importance to their particular audience. The temporal aspect of these poems, their grounding in the now, appears to be one of the most significant features of spoken word poetry, setting it apart from other genres.

It is important to remember that the winning poems are those the public can identify with. Poet and educator Sarah Kay underscores the role of spoken word poetry in providing at least the opportunity to express the writer’s individual experience and speaking to the listeners’ or spectators’ experience as well.¹⁷ Spoken word poetry typically involves a specific kind of closeness between author and lyrical persona, spoken word poems are written in the first person, most often about personal life experiences from the perspective of the “I” who is the performer. A confessional mode or aspect is thus a dominant feature, as well as themes of equality, discrimination, hate, social injustice, and so on.

¹⁶J. Jarniewicz, “Slam, czyli wiersze na ringu” (Slam, or Poems in the Ring), in *Najlepszy poeta nigdy nie wygrywa*, 26.

¹⁷TED talk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0snNB1yS3IE>, (last accessed: 01.03.2016).

As poets strive to establish their authenticity, the manner of expression used plays an important role – they rely on colloquial language, often using profanity, and the use of dialect, slang or a particular accent is also important in underscoring their sense of identity and affiliation. Spoken word poems are often marked by a certain kind of drama, a tone of protest and opposition, not to say rage, less frequently met in other kinds of poetry. Each performance by the poet is an emotional enactment on stage rather than a passive recital. At the same time, the poets never use props, which are forbidden in poetry slams. Among those listening to spoken word poetry, recognition is awarded for directness of communication and spontaneity in delivery. Yet the poet is always addressing an imagined, hypothetical audience as well.¹⁸

As was mentioned earlier, spoken word poetry, due to its strong links with Afro-American culture, constituted a political act from its beginnings: a form of preserving identity through narrative. Thus, poems enjoy great acclaim when they present the authentic, believable identity of the performer. Most often, the identity of the marginalized is perceived as “real”: in the American context, Afro-American identity has for years represented a marginalized category. In recent times, discourses of marginalization have expanded to include the subject of gender, sexual orientation, sexuality more generally, feminist voices, and themes of mental illness and the stigma associated with it.

Media Presence | In the years 2002-2007, HBO transmitted a program devoted to spoken word poetry called *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, in which the best-known poets of the genre performed, as well as pioneers such as The Last Poets or Amir Baraka, both mentioned above.¹⁹ On the program, slam poets also made guest appearances, and spoken word poets who have distanced themselves, or kept their distance, from slam.

The Internet has exerted a significant influence on the rise in the popularity of spoken word poetry. There are currently many websites devoted to publishing spoken word poetry in the form of video recordings. Many poems are also published on YouTube via channels specially dedicated to that purpose. One of the most well-known is Button Poetry, where many excerpts of poems presented at various poetry slams are available to watch. The number of hits (over eleven million) on the recording of Neil Hilborn’s poem OCD, the most popular video on that channel, testifies to the medium’s reach. Other platforms such as TED talks have also repeatedly promoted some poet-performers. A talk given by Sarah Kay, whom I mentioned above, on the subject of writing and teaching spoken word poetry, followed by her performance of the poem “If I Should Have a Daughter,” garnered three million clicks on YouTube alone. Channels belonging to particular poets have also enjoyed great popularity. These are particularly interesting in that they present both classic readings of poems, i.e. by the authors on stage, and transformations of poetic works into animated films with graphics and music, a striking example of which is the film of Shane Koyczan’s poem “To This Day,” recipient of eighteen million hits to this date.

¹⁸Somers-Willett observes that paradoxically, while diversity reigns among poets, the audience of spoken word poetry is, generally speaking, mostly white, which can lead to a kind of fetishization of the poet as a person and the transformation of his/her performance, in the consciousness of that audience, into a kind of circus act.

¹⁹The program itself has received mixed reviews from poets. Marc Kelly Smith accused it of commercializing poetry slams, among other things.

Spoken word is poetry which has abandoned the area of private reading. It is important to note that orality has often been identified with the primitive, and thought to be in some way second-rate compared to writing, hence the depreciation of the role of spoken word. We should observe that in many people's experience – including literature scholars – reading poetry out loud is perceived as flattening it, reducing it to one dimension. Spoken word poetry has moved poetry from the pages of books or the groves of academe to the coffeehouse stage, the pub, the bar, as well as TV and audio or video recording. The spoken word genre questions the existing order. Furthermore, it has a strictly communitarian nature, it is poetry of the downtrodden, returning their voice to those who have been deprived of it. Spoken word poetry also constitutes a fascinating literary phenomenon because it is pluralistic, inclusive, and intersectional in character. Moreover, it raises the meaning of poetry as poetry, endowing it with a new relevance as it becomes a vehicle for expressing **regular** people's experience (i.e. the experience of each and every person), particularly insofar as the flourishing of this form and the birth of poetry slams took place at a moment of the crisis and death – at least officially – of genres and related institutions in literary studies. Spoken word poetry revitalizes the question of whether poetry *per se* exists at the ontological level, on the one hand giving poetry back its seemingly forgotten public aspect (furthermore, slam harkens back to the tradition of poetic rivalries), on the other transcending classical views of poetry as an elite and hermetic art form, designated for reading in an intimate setting, instead bringing it into the multimedia, multisensorial system of reception. But is that, perhaps, exactly what intimacy looks like in our time?

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the article is to describe the contemporary phenomenon of “spoken word poetry” for a Polish audience. The first part presents the origins of this type of poetry, showing the influence of such movements as the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Generation, and Black Art, as well as the role and development of poetry slams in the US and Poland. The second part deals with the specific nature of spoken word poetry as a genre, revealing its typical features: its performative aspect, structure, themes, and function. The third part of the paper provides an analysis of the forms of this poetry’s media presence, whether on television or the Internet, and elsewhere.

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