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Performing the Poet, Reading (to) the Audience: Some Thoughts on Live Poetry as Literary Communication

Abstract: Like its primary medium language, poetry exists in two distinct forms: as written text and in oral performance. Nowadays, live poetry – poetry performed or ›read‹ by the poet to a live audience – constitutes an important mode of publication for poets and thus a prominent mode of experiencing poetry for the ›reader.‹ Given the increasing popularity of literary festivals, open mics, and poetry slams, one could justifiably claim that the English-speaking world is currently experiencing a live poetry boom. As such, live poetry entails a direct encounter and physical co-presence of poet-performer and audience in a specific spatio-temporal situation, a fact which has for a long time been neglected in the methodologies traditionally applied to the study of poetry.

Starting from a conception of oral performance as a basic manifestation of the art of poetry rather than a mere presentation of an essentially written text, this essay reflects upon the ways in which the workings of literary communication need to be reconsidered when the ›lyric I‹ is voiced by a real-life person who addresses an equally real audience. Drawing on examples from selected live poetry events and on concepts from theatre- and performance studies and verbal art studies, the status of the poet-performer will be theorised in relation to the audience as well as to the poetic text.

Due to its status of ›shared experience,‹ live poetry requires a thorough contextualisation. In verbal art studies, live performance is defined as a »specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretative frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood« (Bauman & Briggs). Performance can thus be explained as a simultaneous relation to different contexts. A central question for the interpretation of live poetry is therefore how these contexts relate to each other.

As in the overwhelming majority of poetry readings/performances the performer is also the author of the text performed, the poet appears in a double role of ›poet-performer.‹ Focusing on the role of the poet-performer vis-à-vis the audience, an important aspect that needs to be addressed is the relation of the actual and the fictive speech situation: i. e. the relationship established between poet and fictive speaker in performance, as well as the relationship of the actual spatio-temporal situation and audience to the fictive spatio-temporal situation and addressee evoked by the poetic text. For this purpose I will introduce

Fernando de Toro's notion of the theatrical actor as an »icon of the character being performed« and Umberto Eco's conception of theatrical performance as two simultaneous speech acts.

However, unlike in theatre live poetry audiences cannot usually draw on a conventionalised distinction between a real-life actor and an easily identifiable character whose name can be listed in the programme brochure. The poet-performer physically presents him- or herself rather than representing a fictitious character. This will be thematised in relation to Peter Middleton's notion of »the performance of authorship« in live poetry and the idea of a »performance self« (Anthony Howell) – a personality projected by the poet in performance. The poet's twofold role of »poet-performer« is also the reason why the person of the poet is more easily confused with the persona in the poem in live poetry. As the fictive »speaker« emerges in performance through the person of the author, the conceptual split of author/speaker is much harder for the audience to realise in live poetry than when dealing with print. The audience are thus invited to enter the »autobiographical pact« (Lejeune), and examples will demonstrate that some poets consciously work with this identificatory effect of live poetry performance.

Similarly, live poetry may create an interesting relationship between the physically present audience and a poem's fictive addressee(s). I will identify factors and preconditions for this identificatory mode, and its possible effects. Conceiving of the audience as participants in, rather than recipients of, a performance, live poetry analyses must further take into account »spectator performer communication« (Elam) – which has been theorised by Erika Fischer-Lichte as a self-regulating »feedback loop« – as well as »spectator-spectator communication« (Elam).

Finally, Gérard Genette's notion of paratext will be modified to examine the functions of the poet's ad-lib. The examples discussed will serve to demonstrate the context-dependence of live performance: its emergence through spatially and temporally defined performer-audience relations.

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