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Listen to me! The moral value of the poetry performance space

Dr Karen Simecek

Abstract:

Performance is increasingly important to the poet, which is evidenced by the growing numbers of videos and audio recordings online including YouTube, the National Poetry library, and Poetry Archive. As a result, there are greater opportunities to engage with poets reading their own work and consequently, there is a need to move away from thinking of poetry as primarily something that takes shape on the page. Furthermore, by refocusing attention to poetry as an oral artform, in particular to poetry performance, different ways of understanding the value of poetry come to the fore. The live poetry performance, I argue, offers an attempt to reclaim the personal individual expression of language in contemporary society and demands attention by the audience because of the role of voice and body in the performance. Through awareness of 'uniqueness of voice,' the performed poem becomes a site of collective meaning making with individual identity intact as a shared endeavour between performer and audience, and necessarily resists appropriation (in the sense that the words experienced cannot be divorced from the performer or the performance space to serve as a proxy for meaning elsewhere). This chapter therefore makes an argument for the need to engage with spoken word and performance poetry in the live performance space.

1. Introduction

Websites such as The National Poetry Library, Poetry Foundation and Poetry Archive provide access to a huge database of audio and video recordings of spoken word and performance poetry in addition to the reproduction of page poetry online. This marks an important turning point in the accessibility and archiving of poetry as freely available to the general public. At the same time, the demand for poetry in the live performance is increasing in popularity with a number of spoken word festivals and poetry events now taking place annually in the UK, North America and Europe, such as London's The Last Word Festival. Is the live performance merely a way of promoting works for people to later engage with online and on the page or is there something more significant about performed poetry? Does poetry need to be experienced in the live performance? In this chapter, I argue that hearing a poem read aloud as part of a performance can play a valuable role in a certain kind of emotional and moral activity that differs from what we can get from reading poetry alone off the page or even watching a recording of a performance (that's not to say that these other modes of engagement aren't valuable, I merely want to highlight what is unique in the live poetry performance).

The poetry performance space is a place to be heard and seen, which requires not only a speaker but a hearer. The reciprocal relationship between the poet and the audience is an ethical one insofar as it involves establishing an interpersonal relationship in which the poet calls for attention and the audience is responsive to those demands (the audience can either meet those demands or fail to meet them). Videos are good at getting us so far in terms of presenting the work in an embodied way and drawing attention to the performer of the work but there is a powerful political role of the poem performed live to an audience. What there is in the live performance is a direct connection between

audience and poet, that is, a powerful calling to attention of an individual (their voice, their body and their identity). The risk is that the audience fail to engage and listen (checking one's phone, thinking about tomorrow's plans or talking with a friend) and consequently fail to acknowledge the expression of another. However, there is a powerful benefit where the audience does acknowledge the individual expression of the performer. What comes with such a moral dynamic is the potential to acknowledge difference in experience whilst feeling together; everyone is individual but that does not prevent a community coming together with what is shared between them. In making my case, I will address the two sides of the performance: first, the performance itself and why we should take seriously poetry as embodied and tied to the body of the poet and second, why it is important to experience poetry live as opposed to a mere recording. I will end by discussing the moral significance of the potential shared experience of watching poetry performed together as an audience.

2. Voice, breath and embodiment

How unique is the voice? How does such individuality of voice affect the reception of the work? The human voice is able to convey emotional and attitudinal expression in a way that words on the page or spoken by a synthetic voice cannot (although, I note here that technology is progressing fast and the nuances of human voices is now being captured in the synthetic voice). Intentionality is embedded in the human embodied voice in a way that is hidden or divorced in the case of words on the page. "The typical freedom with which human beings combine words is never a sufficient index of the uniqueness of the one who speaks. The voice, however, is always different from all other voices, even if the words are the same" (Cavarero 3), consequently, it is the embodied voice that asserts individual existence and identity, which is not captured by the sentences one forms but the vocalisation of those sentences with all the nuance that the human voice carries in shaping how those words are received. In the live performance, we cannot hear the articulation of words without hearing them as embedded in a performative context which includes pitch, timbre, intensity, rhythm, facial expressions and bodily gestures – all delivered and controlled by a performer, which not only offers the word meaning to the audience but the performer's approval, disapproval, anger, joy, fear, contentment, etc. This shapes reception and interpretation of the work in terms of what the audience is invited to do with that performance since they are not only hearing the words (and considering the word meaning) but are also hearing and seeing attitudinal expression that conveys an additional layer of information.

Meaning is connected to the history of the body because of the impact of the body on the aesthetics of the work and how the words are received by an audience. The voice reflects where that performer grew up, where they live and the communities of which they are a part. The history of the voice not only shapes vocabulary but also the articulation, intonation and weighting of words. Poet and spoken word artist, Anthony Anaxagorou talks about how he writes for his own voice, by attending to how the words sound as he speaks them and the natural rhythms of his own speech: "Your palate will always inform your poetry, and what you're reading and what you're thinking will always resonate within that. Poetry is the representation of the poet" (Anaxagorou). I take Anaxagorou to be saying something quite literal here; the 'palate' is a reference to the roof of the mouth as much as it's a reference to personal taste. Even personal taste is cultivated through bodily encounters with works of poetry, whether reading aloud or silently. One's enjoyment of a work of poetry is in part due to the way in which the body participates in the rhythms of the work through the breath. Where one fails to catch the rhythm, there is disengagement or dissonance with the work. Consequently, there's a sense in which poetry is restricted since it isn't available to everyone. Poetry represents the body of the poet, that is, their way of seeing the world and their way of speaking it. If a reader is too far removed from the identity of the poet (insofar as it is relevant to the poem), they will be unable to connect with the work. To illustrate, consider Neil Hilborn's spoken word piece 'OCD.' I am unable to physically speak and perform this work authentically due to the ways in which I am able and unable to control my body. Through his performance, "Hilborn not only thematises compulsive tics by describing

obsessive routines ('I spent more time organizing my meal by colour than I did eating it') and repeating words ('The eyelash on her cheek, the eyelash on her cheek, the eyelash on her cheek'), he also *performs* the tics by expressing frustration and making seemingly uncontrollable gestures" (Van der Starre 59). I am unable to replicate the rhythmic aspect of the repetitions of thought and unable to express the feeling of frustration at the obsessive thinking that blocks completion of the thought largely because this is not something that has been part of my history. Although I can read first personal accounts of what it is like to live with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, I do not know what it feels like to embody this condition and therefore I am unable to perform it. Because of the history of his own body Hilborn can perform this work authentically by utilizing his bodily and linguistic repetitions that result from his OCD.

Another aspect of the importance of the body of the performer is simply in the individual accent of the performer and the way this reflects their identity (in terms of beliefs, values and commitments). Take for instance, the performance of 'Celebrate,' a spoken word piece by poet Dizraeli. There are particular rhythms of embodied language that are tied to the performer in the performance. He uses his Bristol accent to bring out the song-like quality of the sound of his voice. He plays with and exaggerates the rhythms and texture of his own voice until those moments where it breaks into song. These patterns of voice could not be achieved in another accent, but also patterns that are tied to his unique articulation of words (i.e. his individual, as opposed to regional, accent). The voice is not carried just in the sounds articulated by the mouth but by the wholly embodied performance. For instance, the way in which Dizraeli uses his body to carry the rhythm and the difference in intensity as he moves towards the audience (or the camera in this case) and away, the tilt of the head and the raising and lowering of the chin. All of these gestures shape reception of the words, not only in the way that such movements change the sonic quality of the words but the way in which the visual affects the aural. The embodied performance creates a connection between the words spoken and the performer in a way that results in an endorsement of the words spoken since the performer is unable to disassociate from the performance of the work (in the way that an actor in a play might) since the performer's identity is expressed in the giving voice to those words. The language is embodied in such a way that it captures an embodied perspective; we take it that the performer is offering a way of configuring significance, value, concern, belief, etc. All those aspects that shape one's individual identity and expresses that identity. To perform a poem is to take ownership of those words (albeit temporarily) since they are given physical expression.

Not only is the performance of the work tied to the body of the performer but how an audience interprets the meaning or 'aboutness' of the work is also tied to the body of the performer. The embodied performance shapes the felt nature (through aesthetics and affective aspects of the work) as well as the reception and understanding of the work, in particular, what as an audience we are invited to do with the work. Consider here Claire Collinson's award-winning poetry performance 'Truth is Beauty,' which is staged as part of a life-drawing class. In her performance, she presents her poetry as intimately connected to her body, which she describes as her 'single-breasted monologue' having undergone a mastectomy as part of her treatment for breast cancer. In advertising her performance, Collinson comments: "Why are the thousands of women like me so hidden? What anxieties do we share as a society, where disguise is regarded as important as treatment? And how can women make informed treatment choices when there is so little representation of us within mainstream culture?" Her performance attempts to disrupt mainstream culture and challenge dominant views of the female body by using the performance space as a place to be heard and be seen. In this case, it is interesting that her expression of uniqueness of voice in the embodied performance is not intended to be exclusive but to create a space for others who feel marginalised in a similar way. In other words, the authentic and individual performance acts to bring a community together who share something significant (a way of being, seeing the world and values held). Being seen and being heard provides an opportunity for others to participate in a community united by values. Given the deep connection

between words and the embodied voice in this performance, the poetry performance would lose its power to disrupt dominant views of the female body if it were re-performed by someone whose body did not share a similar history.

Voice is lost or, at the least, obscured in written language. Although it is true that there is a stylistic dimension to written text that gives it character, this is not sufficient to count as 'voice' which is necessarily tied to the history of the body that enables voice (which can be hidden in the written word). The reading of written texts is an illusory form of being heard since the text needs to be re-voiced by a reader (even if this is only an imagined re-voicing). The reader must embody the rhythms of the pattern of language used through the breath, and make it their own in order to bring the work to life, which may well have benefits for the reader but it does not cultivate skills in listening and attention. One of the unique features of the poetry performance is therefore the attention to the body in the performance space and awareness of what it takes to truly listen to another:

"In the uniqueness that makes itself heard as voice, there is an embodied existent, or rather a 'being there' in its radical finitude, here and now. The sphere of the vocal implies the ontological plane and anchors it to the existence of singular beings who invoke one another contextually ... the voice manifests the *unique being* of each human being, and his or her spontaneous self-communication according to the rhythms of a sonorous relation." (Cavarero 173)

The uniqueness of voice expresses the existence of an individual human being, which at the same time reaches out to others as a voice recognisably human yet idiosyncratic. The voice represents an invitation to share whilst recognising individuality and difference.

3. **Being seen and heard: attending to the individual in the poetry performance space**

Having established the ways in which uniqueness of voice shapes the poetic work, I now want to turn to the demands this places on the audience. The poet Dean Atta, speaking about the power of poetry, highlights the way in which the poetry performance serves a deep human need to be heard:

"All voices should be heard or given the chance to be heard. A lot of people don't see where their voices are being heard in mainstream politics ... [Through poetry] people can talk about very private matters and make them public, open and accessible. They can talk about conversations they've had in their family or something that happened in their childhood. These things shed a light, maybe a small bit of light on different things – but that always helps." (Farnsworth)

It is interesting that Atta doesn't place emphasis on the *speaking* but on the *being heard*. In society there are some voices that are heard more easily than others. On one level this is simply due to status and platform (e.g. celebrities and politicians) but on a more everyday level, this is the product of one's social position and relative privilege to those around them in a given context. Those marginalised due to their race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic background, etc. will find it harder to be heard, which makes the desire and need to be heard even greater. As Atta highlights, this is not merely of benefit to the individual (in satisfying their desire and need) but to society; hearing a plurality of voices and attending to individual voices helps us to better understand the world, each other and the society we live in.

What is involved in hearing and seeing poetry in the live performance? How does the poetry performance facilitate acknowledgement of another? What demands are placed on the audience? In Ruth Awolola's performance of her poem "Sorry," the performance of the poem demands attention

to her body in relation to the words spoken. There is a need to not only hear her speaking but to see her speak, including her gestures towards her body and emotional expression. In other words, it demands acknowledgement of her vulnerability. Anyone failing to attend to her embodied expression including her gestures towards her body are failing to attend to the poem, and failing to acknowledge her. One way of understanding this is in terms of 'bearing witness' — there is an implicit judgment in the reception of such 'authentic expression' of the embodied, poetic voice. To attend to that voice is to acknowledge that experience as significant and worth attending to but in the poetry performance, this is heightened in that we are doing this as a member of an audience.

As Caverero notes "thought is as solitary as speech is relational ... There is a dependence on others that passes through a plural connection of mouths and ears" (175). She goes on to say "speaking is not at all a thinking that expresses itself out loud, nor is it merely vocalized thought, nor is it an acoustic substitute for thinking. The phenomenology of speaking possesses an autonomous status in which the relationality of mouths and ears comes to the fore" (*ibid.*) and consequently, speaking must be thought of always in relation to being heard, in other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between the speaker and the audience. The philosopher Pamela Sue Anderson has spoken of the significance of the dependence between individual expression of a speaker (or performer) and audience. A speaker is vulnerable to the audience because being heard depends on an audience doing what is required to hear them, for instance, to recognise the speaker as one who has the authority to speak about what they are expressing and to adequately attend to the speaker. Although she is speaking about the difficulty of being a woman in philosophy (where women are significantly underrepresented), what she says is applicable to any context where someone who is marginalised due to sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia etc. struggles to have their voice heard: "The vulnerability of a (woman) speaker follows from her dependence upon an audience; if she is to be heard, her dependence requires an audience who is both willing and capable of hearing her as a speaker and a knower" (Anderson). A reader is not necessarily coming to the work equipped to hear it. However, one of the values of hearing poetry together in the live performance space is that this can help one come to meet the demands of the poem by gaining awareness of the demands placed on the audience, that is, to hear and acknowledge the expression of another fully (including those aspects one is unable to understand due to difference in experience).

Anthony Anaxagorou reflects on the vulnerability of a spoken word artist to the audience that they are performing to: "The white middle-classes, for example, most likely won't 'really want to be hearing apoplectic poems about white supremacy, structural racism, colonialism, and genocide. That's not their cup of tea because of the fact that there is an indirect reference to their privilege'" (Potter). Such awareness of who the audience is and their potential to fail to acknowledge the individual expression of the performer can lead to a form of self-silencing, where a performer worries that the audience will not be in a position to hear what they want to express. The consequence is that they don't say what they want to or seek out particular audiences to express their voice to. Anaxagorou comments "But when you're in a poetry reading or at an event where the majority of the people attending are people of colour, 'they will want to hear that and it will resonate and there will be that connection. It all depends on the reader'" (Potter). As Anderson argues, such vulnerability is not something that should be seen as a weakness of some groups in society but is there whenever someone stands in front of an audience and asks to be heard and seen. Therefore, this is a concern for all, whether or not one happens to be in a position of privilege (they are just likely to feel constrained to a lesser extent and have less awareness of their vulnerability as a speaker). But more than that, what Anderson is highlighting is the responsibility of the audience to offer the speaker affection to enable mutual affection between speaker and audience so that individual expression can take place and be heard, seen and encouraged.

4. Building communities and sharing in the live performance space

Through awareness of ‘uniqueness of voice,’ the performed poem becomes a site of collective meaning making as a shared endeavour between performer and audience. This facilitates the emergence of shared emotions which, as Zahavi and RoCHAT comment, “rather than simply being a question of having the same kind of emotion as another, involve a reference to the first-person plural. They amount to a dynamically emergent and negotiated we-experience” (545). The sense of “we” and “us” emerges from a *negotiation* of individuals within a community (such as that formed by the performance space), which allows individuality to come to the fore within a group dynamic. We get a sense of “we” through overlap of import that shows up in our sense of responding in a similar way (it’s not that my emotion is the same as yours but there is some commonality in our response, namely, the same kind of evaluation or appraisal). Forming such a common-ground in a live performance will be somewhat different to the experience of reading a poem on the page. In reading a poem, we attend to the words on the page with awareness of how the poem unfolds, visibly filling space on the page. The contrast between the white space and text leads us to see significance in the words. In the live performance, the contrast between the silence and the words leads us to see significance in the expression of a human voice and its call to be listened to.

The punctuating of silence of spoken word achieves a demanding of attention to the words and their aesthetic quality. The silence of the piece acts as the staging for the words. The call to attention to the body of the physical staging (of poet and microphone stand) acts as a visual medium for the oral staging of words against the silence. The words take on a special significance as a consequence of the marking of the performance space through silence and performer on stage. The live poem unfolds in the silence that surrounds it and the silence heard in the gaps between the rhythms and riffs of the words, which has the effect of calling attention and creating vivid experience.

Take for example, Benjamin Zephaniah’s ‘Rong Radio Station.’ The oral patterning of words comes together to form an affective unity through the complex relationship between sounds of words. This relationship between affect and meaning acts as a symbol for the way in which belief is shaped by the affective atmosphere generated by the media, how this infiltrates one’s own language and ultimately shapes self-understanding. The affective unity is undercut by the loosening of repetition of sound and increasing desperation in Zephaniah’s performance, with changes in body, the unexpected elongation and accenting of certain words representing a failure to fully absorb or resist the beliefs projected through media representation. Zephaniah’s refrain turns into a riff that unravels what has come before with the repetition of ‘I have been listening’ which turns to ‘I needed to know’ as a way of offering explanation of what resisted reflection to what was heard. The piece ends with the following:

Listen to him, can you hear?
Listen to her, can you hear?
Listen to it, can you hear?
Listen to me, keep this frequency clear!
Tune in, Drop out.

The poem changes from placing the audience as a passive observer to being the ones called to act. The final lines are a command for the audience to reflect on what they hear but crucially to ‘listen to me’.

If we consider the heard quality of a poem (that arises from its form) as well as its content (the word-meaning, thematic concepts, images, etc), there is a suggestion that experience a poem in the performance space might help us to attend more carefully to such affective aspects of a poem. Responding together can facilitate shared emotions and such emotional experience can be morally

valuable. That is not to say that we respond in an identical way as one another, but the experience is a complex of our individual response with awareness of others responding to the same object of focus, i.e. the same performance of a particular poem.

As an audience, we are led to joint attention rather than the experience of merely being guided to attend to the same thing because the performance *resists appropriation*; we cannot imagine oneself speaking those words or thinking those words without the presence of the performer because the words are necessarily in the performers' voice. This also prevents emotional contagion from performer to audience member (although contagion between audience members might be possible) because we have different routes in our attending to *that* subject: the performer, directly through the words they are embodying and the audience, through the guided attention facilitated by the performer.

Although literary critic Nerys Williams argues that "we can consider the poetry performance as a form of musicality: poetry, as Charles Olson suggested, becomes a score for the voice" (Williams 98), I want to deny this strong connection between music and performed poetry. The key difference is the use of the word - words are something we share; we share their meaning and share their usage; a shared human practice. This brings me to another important aspect of the experience of the performance which results in joint attention and shared emotion, the *human voice*: in seeing a performance of a poem, one cannot ignore the ever presence of another human being but crucially a performer who is not performing as a representation of some character. This facilitates this sense of overlap of sense of import with another person. The emotional response in the case of the performed poem, might start out as grounded in concern for the performer (we have the expectation that they will be expressing something personal). But this is modified during the performance, so we in effect shift our grounding from having the performers as our target/focus of emotional attention to something they direct our attention to.

This is important for interpersonal relationships: we need to understand one another in both cognitive and affective terms and appreciate what we might share with them in order to have a sense of what is of concern to a group. We sometimes need others to guide us towards something we recognise as something we care about (or ought to care about) that we couldn't discover otherwise. Philosopher Susan Dwyer argues: "A close friend can tell me things about myself I might otherwise not be able to know. But how much better if she can *show* me those things; if she can coax -- not manipulate -- out of me actions and behaviours that are genuinely revelatory of my self" (6). And what if some aspect of ourselves, our humanness as necessarily related to others, is only accessible with reference to others? Such experiences of feeling together might be the only way to be shown these aspects of ourselves.

If we think of poetry in terms of giving us access to certain kinds of ideas which are of human concern and relevance, then we need to encourage ways of moving beyond our own individual perspectives to something shared or shareable with others, and this, I have been arguing, is what is available in the poetry performance. In David Constantine's words:

Poetry is common. The stuff of it is common, even commonplace. Poetry comes from what we as human beings have in common. It puts us in living touch with our shared realities. And it can extend and increase the things we share ... Much of what poetry tells us we know already, but not well enough, not keenly enough, not so that it matters. Poetry helps us realise common things better. (226)

Constantine follows this line of thought of poetry moving beyond the individual experience to something which has the potential to move us to an intersubjective mode: "Poetry then, made of

words, engenders a condition in which the single personality dissolves and we enter into other lives, other possibilities of being human” (227). However, on my view we are not able to 'enter into other lives' as such, but it allows those idiosyncratic features to fade into the distance in order to reveal other possibilities of overlap of concern with others that we can share concern with.

5. Conclusion

The live poetry performance serves an important ethical need that is not available in the private reading of page poetry or even through listening to recordings or watching videos of performances. The dynamics of the performance space cultivates an atmosphere of significance of the uniqueness of voice that encourages attention to the expression of some individual. The performance space demands such attention and although an audience can fail to meet these demands, there is the potential for individual audience members to be influenced by those around them. The poetry performance space celebrates uniqueness of the embodied voice which allows the body to contribute to meaning making. This is particularly valuable when we look at those silenced or marginalised in society. The performance space enables the individual to reclaim public language by giving voice to words as necessarily tied to the body in order to shape meaning. What this offers is a chance to be seen and to be heard, and this represents a morally significant function of the performance space.

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Biographical note

Dr Karen Simecek is Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick. Her research interests are in Philosophy of Poetry, Aesthetics, Moral Reasoning and the Emotions. She is working on issues around the value of engaging with poetry in terms of how this experience can enhance our understanding of ourselves and contribute to a sense of moral progress. She has published articles in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (2015), *Estetika* (2013), *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2017), *Changing English* (2016), *Philosophy Compass* (2019) as well as a forthcoming article in *Philosophy and Literature*.