Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature, 4(2), 88-100

Available online at https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jell

De-poeticizing Poetry, De-semiotizing Performance:

A Reading of Benjamin Zephaniah's "Dis Poetry"

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Abstract

Often described as Performance Poetry or Dub Poetry, the poems of the Jamaican-British poet, novelist, actor, singer, and playwright Benjamin Zephaniah (1958 -) seem to destabilize all cultural, aesthetic, poetic, political, and philosophical assumptions and, by so doing, seem to destabilize poetry itself. "Dis Poetry" (with 'dis' read, simultaneously, as a demonstrative pronoun – slang for 'this' – and as a prefix that 'un-poeticizes' poetry – anti-poetry) is a poem that has been chosen as the focus of this research project for two main reasons. While the first reason has to do with the poem's performativity and its idiosyncratic parole, the second is rather related to its self-reflexive summary of Zephaniah's dispoetic 'achievements'. The paper will address issues that relate to the poet's performance while reading the poem in public, his gaming with and parodying of the poetic tradition since Shakespeare, the transcendence of semiotics (hence, desemiotics) and all meaning-production apparatuses in his poetry, together with the erasure of the gap that has for a very long time of human art history distinguished 'High' Art from 'Low' Art. The poem will be shown to de-create itself, among other systems of meaning, as it refuses to perform both theatrically as well as poetically.

Keywords

Performance poetry, semiotics, desemiotics, concretization, postpoetry

1. Introduction:

While reading his poem "Dis poetry" in front of spectators at the Live Theatre in New Castle in March 2009, the British-Jamaican dub poet Benjamin Zephaniah put on some ironic facial expressions that seemed to reflect the nature of the poem he was performing. It is true that the reading of poetry in public is as old as literature itself, as it goes back to the classical period through the medieval and the Renaissance ones (Middleton, 1998), but performance poetry, it is to be shown, is a cross-generic event that involves more than just a reading of a poem in public or, as J. Novak argues, a centralization of 'orality' that engenders a marginalization of the written word (2011). The recent development of this poetic subgenre has been problematically perceived as a possible threat to the 'high' art of poetry (Wheeler 2008) for reasons that this paper shall address as it projects to study the poetics and theatrics of performance in and through this specific live encounter between Zephaniah and his spectators. It seeks to address one major (generic) problem that one encounters when reading and/ or watching performance poems: Are they to be taken as dramatic/ theatrical poems or as poetic drama/ theatre? – What makes the issue even more complex is that the poem under study includes within it its own undoing: In a Beckett-like manner, it performs its refusal to perform, and this statement is in itself justification enough why Zephaniah had to look and sound ironic when *acting* the poem out on stage. The focus will accordingly be put on the different linguistic, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects of this refusal to perform. The theatrics of the de-poeticization of/ in "Dis poetry" will eventually be shown to be part of a self-reflexive and deconstructive gaming with tradition that constructs the poem's unique suicidal poetics.

2. Performing the Impossibility of Performing Poetry:

Standing on stage facing an audience that already knows "Dis poetry", Zephaniah's voice reinvents the poem again, as he starts uttering the first lines:

> Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops
> De tongue fires a riddim dat shoots like shots
> Dis poetry is designed fe rantin
> Dance hall style, big mouth chanting,
> Dis poetry nar put yu to sleep
> Preaching follow me

Like yu is blind sheep,
Dis poetry is not Party Political
Not designed fe dose who are critical.
Dis poetry is wid me when I gu to me bed
It gets into me dreadlocks
It lingers around me head
Dis poetry goes wid me as I pedal me bike
I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere
But did is de stuff I like.

The poem opens with a vocal pun. The demonstrative 'dis', pronounced in that peculiar Jamaican accent of Zephaniah's, does not simply mean 'this', it also refers to this kind of poetry as the opposite of what poetry normally does or what it is normally supposed to convey. 'Riddim' is what is there in the poem, and perhaps it is the only thing which can be said to be present in and for itself, for the content is explored as a battleground for different ideas that seek to eliminate poetry and meaning. Zephaniah's performance produces that 'riddim' through the quick and uninterrupted delivery of the lines that barely allows the speaker enough time to take a breath. The words are mostly monosyllabic, and there is a superabundance of consonant sounds that de-creates the flow of words and prevents the formation of melody. In these first fifteen lines of the poem – cited above – plosives like 'd', 'p', 'k', 't', 'b', and 'g' are repeated 85 times. This creates the impression that the poet is not simply uttering his words but is actually spitting them out. The 'rantin' that comes out as bullets from the mouth of a speaker 'dat shoots like shots' might not just reflect an angry tone that emanates from a position taken by the speaker; or perhaps it is this particular meaning of the lines that the spectators are not allowed to reach, first, because of the performer's quick and hysterical delivery, second, because of the ironic smile he adopts while delivering it. Plosives are, by their very nature, sounds that can never form a melody, for they are not as vocally elastic as vowels. The moment a plosive is uttered is the moment it dies, and the poet might have found in this explosive rhetoric a refuge against musicalization.

Instead of creating melody through meter and sound, the above-cited lines create a rhythm of their own that makes them sound more like rap, a music genre that relies on stops and the absence of melody to create its unique musicality. Zephaniah's rapping of lines 10-12:

Dis poetry is wid me when I- gu to me bed
It- gets -into -me- dreadlocks

It- lingers- around me head (Hyphens stand for vocal stops)

overemphasizes the stops that are created in the space separating the different words; but as they are uttered, they undo the very reason why they have been constructed by the poet. Poetry has always been approached from a romantic perspective as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", as Wordsworth himself conceived it (2007), but whereas romantic spontaneity is sacrificed for the logic of imagination ('recollected in tranquility'), the spontaneous overflow of sounds in dub poetry is a product of a spontaneous interaction between the poet and the world of which he makes a part. There seems to be no attempt at re-organizing the logic of ideas, and there seems to be no idea except for the 'riddim' that wants to be created. This spontaneity in performance poetry, therefore, relates to the production of sounds and not to the production of signs and symbols (the case for romantic poetry, for instance).

"In lyric," writes S. Stewart, "we find the continuance of a prepolyphonic emphasis on the individual voice and the tension between rhythm and meter." That 'tension' is highly productive, and meaning is a product not of the beats themselves but of the intervals created between one beat and the other (1998):

Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved

And if I hav a problem de riddim gets it solved,

The two lines above summarize the aesthetics of performing with the impossibility of performance. Dub poetry involves 'no big words', no sophisticated systems of signification or symbols and images that are woven together to create meaning. There is nothing but 'riddim', and it is "Reggae riddim," which is technically held down by the bass, or the anchor. In an interview with E. Doumerc, Zephaniah admits that the kind of poetry he writes reproduces in performance the rhythms of reggae music which is, for him, more than just a music genre:

> Most of the time I do use reggae rhythms consciously in my poetry. Again it can't be helped. Do I have to sit down and go 'Right! Let me deny all this heritage I have, all this music I grew up with. I mean I also deejayed on sound systems and told jokes. It would be silly for me to deny all of those things! But reggae is probably the strongest influence I have. And I'm happy with that. (2004)

Reggae has often been described as a 'jumpy' music because of these magical interactions that it creates between sound and silence; its tempo is, unlike canonical music, slow enough to allow the listener's ear to capture the rhythm of the sound. Yet, the slowness of tempo is subversive

of traditional melodious music, and it might even be said to capture the natural slowness of motion and of thinking of a satirical voice.

Traditionally, sound and music were not perceived as important poetic devices; they were viewed as instruments in poetry:

> Whenever a poet values metaphor, or the supersensible dimension of poetry more generally, sound as the material manifestation of the work will be less emphasized; often sound will be held in diminished estimation as a mere "prop" or frame for poetic thought. [. . .] Sounds follow other sounds and so appear in a relation to those sounds preceding and following them. Play within the determinations of such a relation will always be in tension with any "pure" arbitrariness. There are, then, a number of complex conditions under which we can say that "sound" is and is not an aspect of lyric. (Stewart, 1998, pp. 30-32)

The overvaluation of sound at the expense of the poetic content of the poem, therefore, can be aesthetically explained as an attempt to transcend the instrumental manipulation of sound in poetry as subservient to, for instance, metaphor: “Dis poetry is verbal riddim, no big words involved.” In fact, a poem that does away with imagery and ‘big words’ is a poem that plays a risky game of self-immolation.

“Dis poetry” refuses to perform; yet, its refusal to perform is in itself performative, and it occurs at three distinct levels: the linguistic, the poetic, and the aesthetic. Linguistically speaking, there is no Speech Act that is allowed to take place in the poem; it is rather “pure rantin.” This is because it is not designed to make one sleep (line 5) or to preach (lines 6 and 7); nor is it meant to be political (line 8) or attract “dose who are critical” (line 9). Poetically speaking, the poem seems to deliberately shun imagery, for there is no central metaphor that can be said to secure its structural unity, no symbols, and no regular meter. It is to be noted that the only figure of speech allowed in it is simile, and it is one that, unlike a metaphor in which the link between the two compared entities is not usually obvious, does not require thinking to be located: “like a riddim,” “like shots,” “like yu.” Even these similes, which appear in the first lines, progressively disappear by the end of the poem and are deliberately substituted for by more affirmative statements:

> Dis poetry stays wid me when I run or walk
> An when I am talking to meself in poetry I talk,
> Dis poetry is wid me,

Below me an above,
Dis poetry's from inside me
It goes to yu
WID LUV.

The poem is now fully contaminated with 'riddim', and it seems that it has nothing else to offer but that. That 'riddim' is a reproduction of the poet's life and vision, it is lyrical in its form only, and that is perhaps the only thing that the speaker wants to share with the listeners – rhythm. Depoeticization occurs, then, as a result of a progressive peeling off of the different layers of meaning and content in poetry until the only thing that shall remain is rhythm, pure and proper rhythm. Zephaniah in this poem sets himself apart from other performance poets, in fact, not only because he wants to communicate nothing but also because he ceaselessly looks for ways how to perform the absence of communication in front of spectators. Rhetorically speaking, there is a centralization of a culture-specific dialect and an issuing subversion of the traditional hierarchy that has always placed standard/ written English above other variations/ dialects. If one were to apply modernist standards on this poem, it would have been certainly categorized as 'low' art. While Zephaniah's voice utters the lines of the poem quickly enough to produce that reggae rhythm the poet is seeking to reproduce, the spectators laugh twice, after lines 14-15 ("I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere/ But dis is de stuff I like) and after lines 44-45 ("And den I got a dread degree/ In Dreadful Ghettology"). This spectatorial reaction to the ironies of 'dispoetry' shows the extent to which it can be deconstructive of the traditional distinction between 'high' and 'low' art (the art of Shakespeare versus that of the ghettos).

3. Postpoetry?

The distinction between 'high' and 'low' art was the result of Modernism's inability to cope with those new forms of artistic expression that have been designed to destabilize the canon. According to Susan B. A. Somers-Willett in *The cultural politics of slam poetry* (2009), one of the greatest achievements of performance poetry is that it helped 'democratize' the genre – poetry – because of its "dedication to accessibility." She concludes that performance poetry "deliberately took verse outside of the academy, taking evaluative power away from academic critics and giving it to popular audiences" (2009). It was with postmodernism that the binarism 'high'/'low' has been transcended, as L. Hutcheon opines, and the work of F. Jameson, H. Lefebvre, and G. Călinescu attests to how postmodernist democratic pluralism was a direct

product of the dissolution of bourgeois hierarchies and the erasure of the boundaries that have been historically used to privilege 'high' art at the expense of a so-called 'lower' art (1993). Poetically speaking, the first category has distinguished itself through its willingness to express whereas the second one has so daringly got rid of the 'will' itself through the refusal to communicate, hence Lyotard's theory of *desemiotics*.

Lyotard coined the term *desemiotics* in "La dent, la paume" (1973) to describe (rather than prescribe) a general tendency in modern theatre to de-theatricalise itself. This is done through a strategic displacement of the sign (and, correspondingly, of semiotics) together with its referent. In *Dictionary of the theatre* (1998), P. Pavis defines and discusses *desemiotics* as part of *theatre semiotics* and shows how the first one perceives performance as an act of communication whereas the second sees it as an event that does not necessarily need to communicate. Perhaps one can draw the same remark here in relation to Zephaniah's poem whose central metaphor is that it wants to do away with metaphor, as mentioned earlier.

When the German theorist H. Lehmann inspected the shift that has started to appear in theatre history from a theatre that wanted to communicate to a theatre that has given up the attempt altoghther, he dubbed this new tendency as *postdrama* (2006), and, likewise, we shalll borrwo from Lehmann here and say that Zephaniah's poem is logically transcendental of what preceded it – poetry. This can be partly explained through the poem's reliance on theatricality rather than on exclusively verbal aesthetics. Middleton describes the rituals of performance poetry as they have historically developed out of a long tradition that involved public readings of poems:

> A person stands alone in front of an audience, holding a text and speaking in an odd voice, too regular to be conversation, too intimate and too lacking in orotundity to be a speech or a lecture, too rough and personal to be theater. The speaker is making no attempt to conceal the text. Signs of auditory effort in the audience are momentarily lost in occasional laughter, tense silences, sighs and even cries of encouragement. Sometimes the reader uses a different, more public voice and refers to what is being read, or to some other information of apparent interest. No one talks to the reader. No one proposes a second take. No one reflexively discusses the ritual itself. It is "a particularly 'mute' form of activity . . . designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking. This ritual is an ordinary poetry reading of the

> land that has become widespread in the past forty years, and is therefore so familiar to most readers of contemporary poetry that its strangeness requires an alienating description in order to be visible at all. (1998)

However, and as Middleton explains, the theatrics of performing (with) poetry have been historically marginalized. Little research has been done on the way performance can alter the poem, little consideration has been given to how the poet himself, impersonating the persona, might intervene either to open or close the poem:

> What could be more natural than people interested in poetry gathering together and singling out someone to present a low-budget demonstration of the full emotional and sonic effects of their poetry so that dedicated readers can comprehend the author's intentions to the full? The apparent indifference to explanation may also be simply the result of a commonplace assumption that nothing remarkable happens to the poetry itself at these events, that meaning stays fundamentally unchanged. (1998)

Obviously, insofar as Zephaniah's performance of "Dis poetry" is concerned, we have already stated that his performance stresses the ironic tone with which the poem must be delivered, because, after all, the real ideological risk that postmodern art has had to deal with related to how seriously people would take it. There is in postmodernism a desire to destroy without remorse, and there is an openness that makes it possible to read dispoetry (or postpoetry) – poetically – as a self-effacing expression of the impossibility of poetic expression.

And yet, as long as the impossibility of poetic/verbal expression is theatrically performed through performance, then performance poetry exposes and plays on the boundaries that have historically been said to separate writing from performance, i.e. speaking from doing (if we were to borrow from Austin's taxonomy). "Since Aristotle," W. B. Worthen writes, "the dialectic between language and spectacle, writing and performing, has sustained inquiry into the drama, animating the strictures of neoclassical decorum, informing the iconoclasm of Nietzsche and Artaud, and marking the exploration of theatrical practice from Stanislavski to Grotowski, Bogart, and beyond" (2010).

Zephaniah's poem is written in *free verse*, which M. Perloff defines as a poetic genre that is characterized by its "variability (both of stress and of syllable count)," one that "[avoids] obtrusive patterns of recurrence" and "tracks the speaking voice (in conjunction with the moving eye) of a perceptive, feeling subject, trying to come to terms with what seems to be an alien, or at least incomprehensible world" (1998). The unity of the poem, therefore, is secured

not through its form but through the final mosaic of images that are mostly concrete and which are not allowed to reorganize themselves to form a metaphor.

The last sentence is, in fact, a perfect summary of the aesthetic effect that a poem like "Dis poetry" creates upon its spectators. One cannot gather a final meaning or, in the words of T. S. Eliot, an 'objective correlative', and cannot force the poem to transcend the denotative meaning of the lines, as I have already explained earlier. There is, in "Dis poetry," a flow of sounds and "riddim" that is far more important than any meter or meaning the poem can produce. "The rhythm of continuity," Perloff explains, depends upon the unobtrusiveness of sound structure in free verse, as if to say that what is said must not be obscured by the actual saying" (1998).

The performance of the poem on stage transforms it into an object of contemplation and concretizes the speaker in front of an audience that might fail to distinguish the poet from the persona. "One of the most obvious features of performance poetry," C. Gräbner writes in "Performance poetry: New languages and new literary circuits?" (2008), "is the poet's presence on the site of the performance." She considers this as the most problematic and "controversial" aspect of poetry that is written to be performed because the direct encounter between the poet and his/her audience involves a latent affirmation of the former's authority/authorship. Obviously, it is somehow logical that critics who adhere to the Barthesian 'death-of-the-author' principle take the concrete manifestation of the author (as origin) of the text to be critically risky for the reason that it may involve an issuing "disempowering for the audience" (2008). But Gräbner also claims that the manifestation of the poet-as-actor can be deconstructive of the modernist overvaluation of the author as the text's archeological origin/ center:

> [T]he poet's presence [in performance] explodes the traditional conception of the poet as being above his community; he is now a member of it, and his authority can be addressed, questioned, and redefined (Keane). (2008)

Zephaniah, then, in choosing to perform his poem and give it a 'theatrical shape' seems to have chosen to sacrifice the poet's typical comfort zone – absence.

Performance, J. Drucker concludes, is "an instantiation of a text" (1998), and perhaps it is this transposition of the text from the linguistic to the visual/ theatrical that makes the performance of the poem aesthetically challenging, for performance involves, after all, a re-reading of the text just in the same way as theatrical performance re-invents the drama. Similar to Drucker, Middleton, defines performance as an "embodiment of the poem in time and space," an "event" that can be historically located and that is, by its very nature, interactive:

"Actual poetry performance can therefore assume a much wider significance for the participants than the actual texts might indicate, and in particular, [. . .] can be read as if it were a performance of the affirmation or transgression of foundational social structures" (1998). However, contrary to Drucker and Middleton, S. Stewart suggests that performance poetry is more complex than any 'metaphor of presence' (*instantiation* for Drucker; *embodiment* for Middleton) can suggest:

> There is a limit to the metaphor of presence in lyric. When we attend a poetry reading or hear a poem read aloud by its author in a recording or some other context, we may confuse the speech in the poem with the speech of the person and we may confuse the person who speaks with either the person who speaks in the poem or the person who speaks at the reading. It is not that such information is not useful and interesting; however, it will be information that will be both too particular (specific to an occasion) and too general (theatrical and repeatable in its exaggeration of "significant" features). As a consequence, the "poet" "him- or herself" runs the risk of becoming an artifact of the poem, and the poem itself becomes an artifact of performance. (1998)

Actually, if the risk that Zephaniah seems to have been ready to take has to do with the 'concretization' of the poem in performance, then the way he mocks "big words" and symbols shows that that risk is itself part of the aesthetic effect that he deliberately wanted to construct in performance. I have already argued in the beginning of this paper for the absence of metaphor in the poem and for the importance of 'riddim' in it, and one can securely claim now that the kind of 'dispoetry' created by Zephaniah involves just that – 'riddim'. When spectators are left with no 'big words' to contemplate, when the sounds they hear become more important than the meaning of the words that produce these sounds, when there is no room for interpretation because there is nothing to interpret, the only thing that can be said to be *present* is *the absence of poetry* - dispoetry. This Derridean play on presence and absence is what gives this particular poem that kind of immediacy that is constructed in performance, and it is the very reason why I have chosen in this paper to link Zephaniah's performance to Lehmann's *postdrama*.

Lehmann devises eleven different aesthetic qualities that distinguish postdramatic theatre from classical drama (2006):

1. "Parataxis": It consists of "a non-hierarchical use of signs" whereby no sign is to be given any privilege at the expense of other signs.

2. “Simultaneity”: All signs are to be delivered at a time to hinder intellectualization.
3. Playing with Sign Density: Spectators might witness a “deletion” of signs (p. 89).
4. “Plethora”: the dissection of stage images; no final unity of meaning/ perception is allowed.
5. “Musicalization”: this involves variations in pitch, tone, rhythm, etc.
6. “Scenography/ Visual Dramaturgy”: This involves the construction of a concretized stage image and the self-reflexive manipulation of such construction.
7. “Warmth and coldness”: The performer is, after all, present as a *body*.
8. “Physicality”: This involves the body as a center of attention, not the body as a simple carrier of meaning.
9. Concreteness: performance is, after all, an epistemologically concrete/ physical experience.
10. “irruption of the real”: The real does not exist as an object of imitation; it is rather created in performance.
11. “event/ situation”: Performance is a process; it can never finish, as it always relates to a relative/ relational ‘here’ and a relative/ relational ‘now’.

(Lehmann pp. 86-108).

The abridged listing above, it is to be noted, does little justice to the different stylistic features of postdrama that Lehmann comprehensively illustrates in his book. Their comprehensive discussion is actually beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, the inspection of Zephaniah’s performance poetry as an example of postdramatic performance is both aesthetically and critically rewarding as long as what is performed in/through the poem is the poem’s refusal to perform.

The poem “Dis poetry” is aesthetically ‘deprived’ from a central unifying metaphor; it gives no room for intellectualization, reduces meaning to mere absence, allows for no unified or perspectival perception, relies on ‘riddim’ rather than meaning, and constructs a metapoetic and self-reflexive discourse whereby the poem, instead of referring to something, refers only to itself (note the demonstrative ‘dis’). All this is communicated through the physical/ concrete presence of the poet on stage that anchors the speaking ‘I’ of the poem and gives it shape (the ‘I’ of the persona is associated to the ‘I’ of the poet through the ‘eye’ of the spectator). “Dis poetry” is, in fact, a ‘postpoetic’ poem that postdramatically happens in time and space, hence the relevance of Lehmann’s taxonomy.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that a poem like Zephaniah's, in fact, cannot be 'analyzed' or 'interpreted', for it parodies and dismisses both critical endeavors and invites the spectator to live/ experience the poem as an event. Because it transforms poetry into a social happening, then performance poetry can be said to relate to Lehmann's postdrama. The last aesthetic feature in his taxonomy, actually, figures as an ultimate objective of this new form of drama that seeks to go beyond the classical reduction of performance to a communication event, and it seems that the poetics of negation that Zephaniah constructs in the poem have been contaminated by the same logic. The encounter between the performer and the spectator in the poem becomes more important than any message that the former would want to communicate. 'Dispoetry'/ 'Postpoetry' is a poetic genre that is poetically and theatrically self-reflexive, and it is also metacritically auto-destructive.

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