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ORAL POETRY OF THE 1960s IN BRITAIN
A SURVEY OF ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

The question of poetry readings revival always comes up in discussions of the state of poetry in Britain in the decade of the 1960s. It is perhaps the most characteristic feature of the British literary scene of that decade that a strong urge to revivify oral poetry appeared after a long time when it seemed almost entirely abandoned.

Its importance lies not so much in the purely literary qualities of oral poetry as in its conspicuous links with the general cultural context, with the tendencies and movements in the art of those times. It is therefore justified to see the phenomenon also in its sociological dimensions, to look at it more as a cultural fact than solely as a literary one.

Critical accounts of the poetic scene of the 1960s often point to a clear-cut dichotomy evident in British poetry. According to Anthony Thwaite¹, it is possible to distinguish two general trends:

(a) a belief in the transparent virtues of spontaneity, immediacy, energy released by both poet and audience in an instant flash of communion, and

(b) a conviction that art has a great deal to do with shape, form, and control, and that a good poem should not reveal all its facets and depths and resonances at a single hearing or reading.

It was the former tendency that favoured poetry readings. All the poetic movements associated with it (e.g. American projecti-

¹ A. Thwaite, *The Two Poetries*, "The Listener", April 5, 1973.

vists and Beatniks, Underground and Pop poetry in Britain, The Liverpool group) used poetry readings as the most elementary vehicle for presenting their poems. It does not mean that the poets who followed the latter path did not adopt the oral medium. Such writers as Ted Hughes, Roy Fuller, Seamus Heaney or Geoffrey Hill can often be found giving poetry readings. The impetus, however, came from the first of the two tendencies². The revival of poetry readings seems to be an inevitable consequence of the growing demand for spontaneity, immediacy and energy in contemporary literature.

Among the followers of this persuasion in Britain one can find Pop-poets (The Liverpool group, Pete Morgan, Lee Harwood), poets associated with the British Underground, strongly influenced by American Beatniks and Projectivists (Michael Horovitz, Anselm Hollo, Dave Cunliffe, Mark Hyatt) and some representatives of British political poetry (Adrian Mitchell, Christopher Logue). It is often claimed that the crucial role in promoting oral poetry was played by Michael Horovitz, the leading figure of the Underground and the editor of the anthology of the movement called *The Children of Albion*³. He was one of the main organizers of the famous poetry reading session which took place in Royal Albert Hall in 1965 with the audience of seven thousand and which is still regarded as the key event in oral poetry revival - the first concerted breakthrough of the movement⁴. The Albert Hall reading, with Mitchell, Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti, was filmed and the film was appropriately titled *Wholly Communion*.

By the second half of the 1960s poetry readings in Britain were organized almost anywhere. To quote Adrian Mitchell, they were held in "studios, cellars, town halls, pubs, folk clubs, pop-, jazz-clubs, street corners, parks, Trafalgar Square, private houses, bookshops, churches"⁵. During poetry readings poets aimed at establishing more direct relationships with their

² H. Sergeant, *The Poetry in the New Decade*, "Contemporary Review", June 1980.

³ *Children of Albion. Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, ed. M. Horovitz, Penguin, London 1969.

⁴ Cf. E. Lucie-Smith, *Thoughts After Advent*, "The Poetry Review", vol. 61, Spring 1970.

⁵ A. Mitchell, *Poetry Explodes*, "The Listener", May 14, 1970.

audience. The linear sequence of a printed text on a white page was supplemented with the poet's voice and personality. Instead of what they believed to be one-way communication, the oral poets tried to create communal experience, based on the principle of participation. They decided to give up the creator-oriented position and had to take into account the existence of the people who spontaneously reacted to their poems. "Laughter and applause, silent concentration or the lack of it, nods, breathing of the audience"⁶ - these were the new factors which the poet could not ignore. Improvisation was one of the results of such a situation. The poet was expected to modify what had been originally written, to adjust and adapt the programme of the meeting to the specific qualities of the audience and the circumstances of the reading⁷. What passed muster on a printed page, was not always successful in the direct confrontation with the living audience. The latter was treated as a co-author of the literary show, the programme of which could not be predicted, the total effect resulting from many different variables. Poetry became an event, and as Jonathan Raban remarks, "event implicates all its participants, one cannot separate out the work itself from either the author who performs it or from the audience whose participatory response has become an essential ingredient of the total experience"⁸.

The explosion of oral poetry in the 1960s was not a phenomenon which could not have been expected. The cultural atmosphere of the previous decade had gradually paved the way for the emergence of the tendency. The dissatisfaction with what was variously described as the establishment, academicism, or elitist culture, the critique of the futility of the middle class ethos, the retreat from authority (including the authority of tradition) resulted in the appearance of various movements of the so-called alternative culture, which tried to introduce new media and independent schemes free from received forms and established institutions.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See G. Lindop, *Poetry, Rhetoric, and the Mass Audience*, [in:] *British Poetry Since 1960*, ed. G. Lindop, Manchester 1972.

⁸ J. Raban, *The Society of the Poem*, London 1971, p. 86.

Poetry readings were conceived of as an alternative to the traditional book form. Choosing poetry readings as manifestations of what they thought to be spontaneous creative energy, oral poets rejected the book which they considered an ossified medium of communication. Books came to be associated with the middle class culture, museum-like factors whose only aim is to collect and preserve, promoting "undemocratic", genuflecting attitudes towards art. "The deader the better is the rule in some quarters" remarked Roy McMullen⁹. The advocates of oral poetry claimed that books, being a strongly commercialized medium in the hands of business-oriented publishing companies, fostered cultural alienation, separated writers from their audiences, confined literature to a sanctuary, detached it from everyday dilemmas. In the age which experimented with eliminating the gap between art and life (cf. pop-art, happenings), such an insulation of literature was found intolerable. Michael Horowitz postulated that poetry should "jump the book", because "books - however beautiful - are more and more distant branches, and not the roots of culture communication"¹⁰. It is worth mentioning here that similar hostility towards the book form appeared much earlier, e.g. in the Futurist manifestoes.

The oral poetry revival can be seen also in the context of Marshall McLuhan's theories, which became popular in the same decade¹¹. McLuhan questioned the concept of print as an effective medium of communication and opposed it to living speech. According to his theory, the act of speech involves auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory sensations. The timbre, the tone and the pitch of voice, the rhythm and the stresses of the utterance carry information which is no less important than the linear ordering of letters. The message is transmitted also by means of visual elements, such as the expression of the speaker's face, the gestures, the distance at which he or she may stand. Tactile sensations, present in an act of oral communication, consist of physical contacts with the speaker (prods, stro-

⁹ R. McMullen, *Art, Affluence, Alienation*, London 1968.

¹⁰ *Afterwords*, [in:] *Children of Albion...*

¹¹ Cf. J. Miller, *McLuhan*, London 1970.

kes, caresses, kisses, etc.) or the temperature which accompanies the event. The fact that all senses can be activated in the process of communication proves - to McLuhan - the superiority of speech over print.

The multi-sensual appeal of spoken communication, contrasted with the one-dimensional written form, brings about simultaneity, impossible to achieve in traditional print, where the message is transmitted in a linear sequence. In speech it is free from that linear order - communication occurs simultaneously through different sensory channels in a symbolic rather than rational way. As McLuhan puts it, print activates analytical reasoning, speech demands synthetical intuition. To him, the way in which people communicate is the most crucial factor determining the character of any culture. In consequence, changes in the manner of communication cause parallel changes in the character of a culture. The introduction of new, electronic mass-media made McLuhan proclaim the end of the "Gutenberg galaxy" (i.e. culture based on print) and announce the beginning of the "global village", where speech and image oust the print, and where information can be conveyed by media disregarding cultural and geographical boundaries.

McLuhan's idea of the global village can be interpreted as an instance of a tendency in the culture of the 1960s which I would call "communal revival". By this I mean the general outward-directed orientation, which in the case of art postulated its participation in public life and social changes. This orientation placed itself in opposition to the ongoing process of the privatization of art - by propagating public forms of art and accentuating the importance of the participation principle. Art becomes public either:

(a) when it is actually performed before an audience, or

(b) if it is meant to be appreciated in public surroundings,
or

(c) if it is concerned with public values.

All three of these aspects, enumerated by Roy McMullen¹², together with the demand for the participation of the audience, combined to create the formula of poetry readings.

¹² McMullen, *op. cit.*

Yet the communal revival was also a wider sociological phenomenon, exemplified by the appearance of various types of communes, by decentralization and the breakthrough of regionalism in British cultural life, by numerous emancipatory movements through which different social groups gained identity (e.g. Black Power, Women's Liberation, youth subculture).

In such a context not only poetry had to undergo various reformulations. The understanding of the poet's function had to change as well. The model poet was now the bard, often the spokesman of the people, living within and writing about his or her community. Adrian Mitchell wrote:

We have to abandon the notion of an artist as a cosmonaut, snug in his capsule, doomed to circle the earth in a perpetual isolation broken only by radio bulletins about the state of his own heartbeat, his soul and stomach [...] We have to give up the fear of speaking directly to people who have hardly ever been exposed to poetry before. We have to give up our fear of people¹³.

Poetry readings can be seen as consequences of such an attitude.

In reaction to the individualistic, introverted model of an artist, there appeared the idea of a collective author. Kamila Rudzińska¹⁴, who introduced this term, sees the phenomenon as one of the most distinctive features of avant-garde art, tracing it back to Dada, Futurism, Expressionism. This orientation created its own distinctive style: the style of collective activity. In the 1960s the best exemplification of this idea can be found in happenings.

It is not by chance that happening is mentioned here, since many poetry readings were in fact reminiscent of happenings. Let me quote John Willet's report on one of the shows organized in Liverpool in 1963, in the Hope Hall Cinema:

despite total lack of publicity it drew an audience of about 350, which was better than many of the films. [There was] a really very, originally-con-

¹³ Mitchell, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ K. Rudzińska, *Niędzy awangardą a kulturą masową*, Warszawa 1978.

ceived and written sketch by McGough with a nuclear disarmament in a bomb-proof suit being questioned... Occasional interruptions from the balcony. Henri as compere. Patten now and again disclosed by the curtain, typing away at a great epic poem which finally he never read. Large pictures by a painter called Don McKinley who used to work with Walsh and Henri, propped against the proscenium. A finale with all the company running round and round the cinema, waving flags... And it was spontaneous, unpretentious, I thought, and above all indigenous. It seemed to meet the demands of a young and attractive audience, who later packed up the club downstairs¹⁵.

In this very early example (Patten was only seventeen at that time), one can see how easily poetry was turned into theatre, how the poets participated in creating a multimedia event with the use of theatrical elements and an exhibition of paintings. In most cases, also music, either jazz or rock, contributed to the general effect.

Poetry readings were an attempt to demonstrate that the separation of arts was a mistake. Literature, music, theatre, paintings were elements used simultaneously in a multimedia event. It is characteristic that many oral poets of the 1960s, such as Adrian Henri, Pete Brown, Tom Pickard, Henry Graham, have all doubled as musicians - poets. Some of them, e.g. Henri or McGough, had their own bands, remaining close to the pop-milieu. Henri, literally a polymath, before he became a poet, was a successful painter. McGough produced and took part in many para-theatrical productions. As one of the poets recalls, poetry readings "involved spoken poetry with jazz, plays, mime, new music, electronics, speeches, film, light-sound projections, sculpture, dance". And all this had one purpose: "to construct a Gesamtweltbild for all art media to inhabit - to nourish - perpetual - rebirth - of wonder"¹⁶.

Happening, the art form that epitomizes the Sixties, proved to be an ideal model for the oral poetry movement. In happening oral poetry poets could find most of the features they valued so high: the union of different arts, the new symbiotic relationships between poet and audience, art incorporated into life

¹⁵ J. W i l l e t t, *Art in a City*, London 1973, p. 183.

¹⁶ Cf. *Children of Albion...*

the new understanding of art as activity, communal experience. When in 1968 Horovitz described poetry readings, he wrote about them as if they were happenings:

The aural, visual and situational elements combine with the unpredictable interaction between the manifold performers and auditors, to throw up a theatre on the spot - transcending the old forms of theatre because what is happening is really happening¹⁷.

Poetry as activity, as an event rather than an object, was a recurring theme in the discussion of the poetry readings revival. It may be claimed that the situation reflects possibly the most radical change in modern art: a shift of the point of interest from the artefact to creative activity, to the very process of creating. This shift, though evident mainly in visual arts, reverberates throughout other regions of art such as theatre music, literature.

The roots of this tendency can be found in the beginnings of our century. As Jonathan Raban remarks:

Tzara, Breton, and Anton von Webern tried to savage the categoric rigidity of the line between art and non-art, to bring the poem, painting, or composition into the temporal realm of events rather than the spatial world of objects¹⁸.

The Sixties eagerly adopted this idea of art as an event, or - to use Lucy Lippard's term - the dematerialization of art¹⁹. The two art movements, which were most characteristic of the decade - conceptual art and happening, were manifestations of this view. Neither of them shows any interest in the production of permanent artefacts. Both stress the importance of the creative process. In happening the actual shape of the event cannot be predicted. There are so many variables, which interfere and co-create the final effect, that the status of the author becomes questionable. There is no traditional triad of "artist - work of art - audience", since in many cases all these three elements merge.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Raban, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁹ L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London 1973.

The tendency to understand art only as a creative process, not as an artefact, appears also in other arts. Jazz seems to be a clear example of art in which performance gains greater importance than the actual musical composition. Jazz is an activity, collective, spontaneous and largely unpredictable, due to the role of improvisation. The same can be said of pop music, which to a high degree demands the participation of the audience; rock concerts turn into communal events in which the songs are only one element of the show. There are certain phenomena in modern poetry which develop along the same line, when poetry readings are preferred to books, and treated as more effective forms of promoting poetry. "Just as jazz is not a music but a way of playing, so is the new oral poetry another way of speaking"²⁰. The words "playing" and "speaking" instead of "what is played or spoken" disclose the general tendency discussed in this passage.

The tendency was very characteristic of the iconoclastic decade of the Sixties. Jonathan Raban rightly observed that this trend "subverts the most basic of all our socio-critical categories"²¹. This may be the reason why most of the critics stood helpless in front of those artistic activities. The inability to recognize the need to eliminate certain habits in art criticism made some critics announce the death of art itself. Indeed, it was found easier by more traditional critics, to proclaim the end of art than to accept the built-in obsolescence in the place of the "timeless masterpiece", or anonymous, group creation in the place of the artist's individuality.

Oral poetry of the 1960s adopted many ideas which had been fostered by the avant-garde in arts. It took over the Romantic concept of Total Art, Gesamtkunstwerk, which questioned the separation of different arts. It reflected the idea of art as an event and the concept of dematerialization. It also agreed upon the proposition that the boundaries between art and life should be eliminated, that art should be implanted into everyday life. Artists associated with many contemporary movements which originated in avant-garde concepts, refused to modify traditional aesthe-

²⁰ *Children of Albion...*

²¹ Raban, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

tic categories and tried to open their art to extra-aesthetic, social and political issues. Earlier art was often declared a mystification, whose aim was to provide a retreat from the dilemmas of the contemporary world. It was believed that to speak about the autonomy of art was a mistake, since art cannot be an isolated phenomenon cut off from the world. The new artists did not want to dwell upon aesthetic issues.

Their attention is turned outwards on the world around them, not inward upon their own reactions to it. And because they find the external world such a fascinating and incredible place they are not satisfied to isolate little pieces of it in the context of fixed, unchanging works of museum art. What they have consistently tried to do is to break down the barriers that exist between art and life, and not for art's sake either"²².

Bridging the gap between life and art remains the main recurring slogan of the twentieth century avant-garde movements. It is in opposition to this concept that non-avant-garde tendencies define themselves. The latter see art in terms of the internal history of art and find inspiration in establishing relationships, either positive or negative, with the aesthetic tradition. The life-art attitude produced many movements, such as pop-art, art brut, art povera, hyperrealism. It was argued here that the list can be supplemented with the oral poetry movement of the 1960s.

In the presentation of the cultural context of oral poetry in Britain the links with avant-garde art and with some social tendencies of the 1960s were stressed. Looking back at the movement, however, one cannot forget about the influence of modern American poets (especially Black Mountain poets and the Beat generation), who in many cases pioneered the poetry reading revival of the decade by introducing jazz-and-poetry sessions, writing for their own voices, exploring the audial and temporal space, exhibiting social commitment and interest in communal activities. To many British poets, the Americans provided the model and the source of ideas. George MacBeth was aware of this inspiration when he remarked that

²² C. Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors. Five Masters of the Avant-Garde*, New York 1968, p. 2.

a number of American poets - e.g. Ginsberg and Creeley - have made their direct impact partly by words on the page, but usually much more so by reading them to people, and by their whole personalities of which the poems seem to be one part²³.

At the beginning of the 1970s the same could have been said about British oral poets and their formula of poetry reading sessions.

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BRYTYJSKA POEZJA ŻYWEGO SŁOWA W LATACH SZEŚCZDZIESIĄTYCH
I JEJ KULTUROWY KONTEKST

W latach sześćdziesiątych na brytyjskiej scenie poetyckiej można było zaobserwować wzmożone zainteresowanie poezją żywego słowa. Liczne spotkania poetyckie, na których twórcy czytali swoje wiersze, przekształcały się często w parateatralne działania, zbliżone do happeningu, recytacjom towarzyszyły koncerty muzyki jazzowej lub rockowej, ekspozycje prac plastycznych, pokazy filmowe. nurt poezji żywego słowa lat sześćdziesiątych związany ideowo z kontrkulturową formacją tamtych lat, programowo wychodził poza obszar literatury, nawiązując współpracę z innymi dziedzinami sztuki (romantyczna w swej genezie koncepcja sztuki totalnej, Gesamtkunstwerk), przeciwstawiając się książce jako jedyniej formie istnienia wiersza, szukając form bezpośredniej łączności z publicznością. Zwolennicy poezji żywego słowa odwołując się do teorii McLuhana, wskazywali na bogatszą informację; jaka przekazywana jest w akcie mowy, aktywizującym oprócz wzroku także inne zmysły. Rozwój poezji żywego słowa dekady lat sześćdziesiątych wiązać można z charakterystycznym dla ówczesnej awangardy nurtem dematerializacji sztuki, postulującym odejście od tradycyjnego rozumienia sztuki jako wytworu ku jej definicji jako procesu, działania czy wydarzenia. Drugim nurtem sztuki współczesnej, do którego odwoływali się poeci omawianej tu formacji, była wyraźna od czasów dadaizmu tendencja do niwelowania różnic między sztuką a rzeczywistością wobec niej zewnętrzną.

²³ Quoted after *Children of Albion...*