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STYLE AND TECHNIQUE IN SPOKEN WORD

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Introduction

Style and technique are distinctly defined but interlinked in practice. Style covers how a piece is written and performed, while technique covers the practical aspects. The style might be humorous, satirical, jarring, eerie, deadpan – the options are near-endless, while technique relates to rhyme, alliteration, intonation and so on, including use of forms and constraints. This chapter is not a catalogue of forms and technical aspects, though some are mentioned along the way. For a more formal, comprehensive treatment, Greene et al. (2012) is recommended; for more concise popular accounts, Fry (2005) and Parrott (1990). Nor this chapter is a how-to guide; instead, it provides an overview of the current spoken word scene, focusing primarily on the UK but looking further afield to acknowledge some of the huge range of influences and traditions that enrich and inspire.

Though centred on poetry, hip-hop, theatre, prose, stand-up comedy and more can be found in the spoken word mix. The structure on the page is typically less important than the aesthetics of sound and the delivery itself, although writing affects performance and vice-versa. In some cases, performance may not require a written form at all as in pre-literate oral traditions, freestyling and other improvisation. In others, such as abstract and experimental writing, the spoken aspect may be highly reliant on written structure, whether on a page or gallery wall. This idea is nothing new; for example, see the discussion of Shakespeare's use of the poetic line in Longenbach (2008).

How style changed

At its simplest, spoken word involves reading. There are recordings of famous poets doing exactly this: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Dylan Thomas' *Do not go gentle into*

that good night, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. They may be evocative, they may feel out-of-date and stilted, but they are historically and literarily important. After all, a key 1969 *Howl* reading was a benefit event for *Big Table*, a journal born out of censorship of the *Chicago Review*, an innovative promoter of the Beat Movement. This reading was a politicised act, something that spoken word continues to provide.

Moving to the present, a literary launch might include fine performance skills, but doesn't have to. Unembellished readings from page or phone may be the norm and meet audience expectations. Similarly, participants at open mics, especially less experienced or confident ones, are likely to read. One aspect is memory; reading does not require memorising the text, whereas performance might. There is no fixed rule however. Many performers memorise their work, but not all. The lack of anything physical to hold can free performers from the urge to look down at paper or screen and may help them develop their voice. However, I have seen excellent spoken word where a book has been used, or brandished but never referred to. It doesn't lessen my experience, and of course some performers can't memorise, for a variety of reasons.

Beyond 'the reading', there is a rich diversity of styles and techniques. The poets of *The Mersey Sound* (Henri et al., 1967) helped popularise poetry by moving away from Oxbridge elitism, broadening its appeal with regional accents and voices. Henri's section even includes *Poem in Memoriam T. S. Eliot*, in remembrance of both the man and his world. In the same year, the *Times Literary Supplement* published an anonymous review stating that Brian Patten's work included 'hardly anything that you would call technique'. Not only was this incorrect as good use is made of repetition (*Meat and Sleep Now*) and enjambment (*Something That Was Not There Before*) for example, but the lyrical, humorous Mersey poets revitalised performance in their city. While The Beatles created *Sgt. Pepper*, they brought poetry to pop audiences.

Some links to music are more overt. In the United States, Gil Scott-Heron fused jazz, blues, R&B and soul to take socially and politically aware spoken word into the wider cultural sphere with *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* from his 1970 album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. Accompanied by congas and bongos (later by a full band) and filled with pop-culture references, it took its title from a Black Power slogan, and was a funk-styled response to *When the Revolution Comes* from The Last Poets' eponymous debut album (also 1970) which blended early hip-hop and rap with jazz poetry. As Scott-Heron says in the last line, 'the revolution will be live'. The 1970s and 1980s saw the birth of slam and the coining of the term 'performance poetry' by Hedwig Gorski in reference to the 1977 group cut-up piece *Booby, Mama!* In the UK, it saw the beginnings of punk poetry by John Cooper Clarke whose recordings included backing music by The Invisible Girls, a band created especially for this purpose. His style involves rapid recitations and witty, cynical descriptions of often scabrous characters and locations. Clarke also toured with Linton Kwesi Johnson, a London-based Jamaican dub poet who began in 1973 with Rasta Love providing the music for his poem *Voices of the Living and the Dead* as he speaks Jamaican Patois over dub-reggae backing.

Diversity of performance

Marc Smith is generally considered to have founded slam in Chicago in 1984. Slams are spoken word competitions where audience members score the performers, often via elimination rounds. Although there are rules such as 'no props or costumes' and a time limit of typically three minutes, in principle any type of poetry is acceptable. As Smith (2009) says, 'All forms can slam'. However, some are employed often enough that they begin to be labelled 'slam-style'. This is a loose definition but typically avoids a specific rhyme scheme, tending to be free-form with high-energy delivery. As the aim is to engage an interactive audience, the subject matter is often emotionally charged, with identity politics and social commentary being common. This combination of free verse and politicisation is unsurprising given that slam was initially influenced by the structures of Beat and the themes (discrimination, oppression, colonialism) of Négritude poets and the Harlem Renaissance. As societal norms shift, so do poetry topics, with mental health and gender identity becoming more prevalent. Barely talked about until recently, since the 2010s, events with strong spoken word components have begun such as London's *And What?* Queer Arts Festival and Basingstoke's *All in the Mind*.

Many performers adopt rhythmic hip-hop styles as might be expected from an often young, urban, diverse scene. Some might take a more narrative prose approach, make ironic use of traditional forms, or add in elements of song, theatre, choreography, beatboxing and so on. Anyone can participate, and in principle, anyone can win. However, hip-hop and rap are designed for vocal performance and lead themselves to slam, echoing the competitive nature of freestyle rap battles, and the improvisational jam of ciphers. This can be a launchpad for poets and rappers alike. In 2011, English teacher Mark Grist battled Grime MC Blizzard. With 5.3 million hits at the time of writing, the resulting video (Don't Flop Entertainment, 2011) went viral, becoming the UK's most watched rap battle. He went on to develop live shows, award-winning spoken word film collaborations, and his debut collection *Rogue Teacher*.

Ideally, no style should become dominant; as slam poet-organisier Allan Wolf said 'The points are not the point; the point is poetry' (Smith, 2009). However, what is popular with audiences is what wins. This can lead to poets following what they see as slam-style and slam-content rather than being true to their own voice – essentially writing and performing to please the judges. With prizes such as paid gigs on offer, it is understandably tempting, but means that while slam is democratising and gives a platform to marginalised voices, there are criticisms. In 1993, one team at the National Poetry Slam in San Francisco produced the broadside *Like Lambs to the Slammer*, highlighting what they saw as widespread conformism and calculated tear-jerking. One of the poets, John Sobol, acknowledges the diversity of participants, and the enjoyable, friendly, positive scene, but remains concerned about homogenisation of the poetry itself (Sobol, 2011). Similarly, poet John S. Hall notes a lack of stylistic diversity (Aptowicz, 2008). These concerns are valid, but not the whole story – many of the poets cited in this chapter are slammers, providing them with

opportunities to shine, and in turn develop others. However, if a performance is impassioned and vocally adept, but the audience can't recall the content, something is missing, and that might be the poet's distinctive voice. Given the aim of slam to diversify voices, this is ironic – doubly so given that identity politics is a common topic – but the positive intent is clear in pieces such as Joelle Taylor's *Last Poet Standing*.

Hip-hop, musicality and more

The influence of hip-hop is undeniable; Kae Tempest began performing in a hip-hop store. Since then, she has blended theatre, rap, poetry and story-telling, combining modern-day tales of people's everyday lives and autobiography with elements of ancient myth in works such as *Brand New Ancients* and *Hold Your Own*. She weaves these into epics and poem-sequences evoking Western oral tradition, but with tone and content of contemporary London. As she says in *Brand New Ancients*,

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caff

Her work is written to be performed, and technique shows through – the short extract above is taken from a long list-section. Elsewhere there are rhymes and part-rhymes in the middle and end of lines. There is plain speech, formal patterns, the arrangement expected from a playwright. In performance, she delivers with intensity, sometimes with the feel of a Revivalist sermon, her musicality creating sing-song rhythms. In *Let Them Eat Chaos*, the title page states 'This poem was written to be read aloud', but there is considerable use of indentation and fragmentation, almost touching on shape poetry in places. These are visual tools used to convey its spoken feel. By 2018s *Running Upon the Wires*, a single absent full-stop is used to indicate that what is written and spoken has not yet concluded.

Deborah 'Debris' Stevenson is another who has used the style of a preacher, in this case to re-imagine Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* through contemporary performance techniques. However, she specialises in Grime poetics (Stevenson, 2016), combining music, dance, theatre and spoken word in her show *Poet in da Corner*. This takes a semi-autobiographical look at the influence of Grime on a young poet-to-be who redefines herself in the light of dyslexia. This mixing of poetry with other disciplines generates innovative pairings. For example, Stevenson worked with violinist Tanya Cracknell to mix spoken word, Grime and classical stylings to create an improvised play (Stevenson, 2017). Re-enlivening, re-imagining, redefining and reclamation are all key themes here, and are seen in much contemporary spoken word. In *Plum*, Hollie McNish does this with her own literary life by including poems from the age of eight to present. The (re)use of childhood writings has a long pedigree, including Jane Austen's *Juvenilia* (Sutherland, 2014).

In *WHITE*, Koko Brown adds live vocal looping with punchy slam-style elements to create a show about mixed-race issues. Zena Edwards, known for polemic,