

The Hermeneutics of Poetry Slam: Play, Festival and Symbol

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss Poetry Slam events as hermeneutic encounters. Gadamer's analysis of play, festival, and symbol form the theoretical basis of the discussion. Exemplary data include my research into aspects of the history and ritual of Slam as well as my experiential data as a spectator, coach of a Poetry Slam team of adolescents who compete in a provincial tournament for young poets, and as a Slam performer. I contend that, despite Slam's occasional "silliness," occasional problems of quality and fair play, and the insistence of many academics that it is not a worthwhile celebration of literature, Poetry Slam has the potential to create meaningful connections between diverse communities and tarry over language as a hermeneutic event. I note that, in an era where text is generated with increasing rapidity while our abilities to appreciate language as an event or as a means of connecting with each other are undermined, Poetry Slams might be the kind of festival we need to seek relief from these trends.

Keywords

hermeneutics, Gadamer, poetry, Poetry Slam, play, festival, symbol

No props, no costumes, no nudity, and no animal acts.
(Canadian Individual Poetry Slam 2015)

We have seen that play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary, play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him. This is all the more the case where the game is itself "intended" as such a reality—for instance, the play which appears as presentation for an audience. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 109)

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I would like to think Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) would have been intrigued by Poetry Slam. The activity combines all the dynamic aspects of “play” he discussed in his opus, *Truth and Method*, with the interpretive and enterprise of artistic communication. The philosopher would have appreciated how the activity of Poetry Slam has given artists worldwide, whose voices might not be heard without this particular form of expression, the opportunity to speak their unique truths, earning self-affirmation of being messengers of import while also expanding the empathy and awareness, the horizons of understanding (p. 537), of those who are listening. Finally, as one who often wrote about the hermeneutic character of social occasions, Gadamer (1986; 2004) would have appreciated how Poetry Slams take on the familiar novelty of festivals.

I first learned of Poetry Slam around four years ago, when I viewed the documentary “Louder than a Bomb” about Chicago’s annual high school Poetry Slam competition (Siskel & Jacobs, 2010). I found the film’s depiction of the courageous teams of adolescent poets, speaking out about personal vulnerabilities and social injustices within the collective of an artistic community that was both supportive and formally competitive, remarkable. It was likely this spark that led me to deepen my relationship with Poetry Slam as an active participant, through co-coaching teams of high school students in the *Can You Hear Me Now* provincial poetry championship and competing myself in adult slam series hosted by two local poetry collectives, *The Ink Spot Collective and University of Calgary Spoken Word Society*. These experiences have, in turn, led me to reflect on the hermeneutic character of Poetry Slamming. In this paper, I will, from the perspectives I have experienced as a spectator, coach, and participant, undertake a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of Poetry Slam as a form of play, as an example of festival, and as a communal exchange of symbol.

What is Poetry Slam?

In 1984, Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker, came up with idea to enliven the poetry readings he was hosting at a local jazz club, the Get Me High Lounge (Burrows 2001). Using terminology borrowed from bridge and baseball, and an Olympic-style, zero to ten point scoring system (Burrows, 2001), Smith turned the readings into a competition in which poets were scored for their craft and performance ability by randomly selected audience members with the top poet of the evening earning a cash prize. Though some poets balked at the imperative to “perform” rather than “read” their poetry (ya Salaam 2001), Poetry Slam turned out to be a popular innovation in the spoken word poetry community, improving for many people the accessibility of an art form that they had come to view, perhaps due to scarring experiences studying it in public schooling (Canadian Individual Poetry Slam 2015), as stodgy and alienating. As Burrows wrote, Poetry Slam “humanize[d] the poetry and [took] it out of its heretofore hallowed academic settings to become something that was owned by everyone -- even the drunk and disenfranchised” (2001, para. 3).

Whether Poetry Slam has succeeded in “re-energiz[ing] the [larger] poetry scene,” (Burrows 2001) or has simply grown into a popular genre of its own with little impact on other poetic arts, it has garnered a massive global following. Myslam.net (2015), an international portal to support slamming worldwide, lists 40 separate countries that host Poetry Slams (2015). In many of these countries, including Canada and the U.S., local competitions lead up to national and international

championships. You Tube views and Ted Talks of acclaimed Slam Poets number from the hundreds of thousands to the millions, Slam Poetry has been lampooned in popular films such as *22 Jump Street* (Hill & Tatum & Lore & Miller 2014), and incorporated into global events such as Shayne Koyzan's 2010 performance of "We Are More" at the opening ceremony of the Vancouver Winter Olympic games.

The rules of Poetry Slam are fairly simple. Poets read or recite their work and are then judged on a numeric scale by previously (and randomly) selected members of the audience. Poems must be original, though some limited sampling of other work for the sake of allusion is allowed. There is a three minute time limit to each poem, with a ten second grace period following, after which points are deducted (Poetry Slam Inc. 2015). The prohibitions against props (this rule is serious, there really are deductions for using props), animal acts, and nudity (tongue in cheek) that I quoted at the beginning of this paper feature as well (Canada Individual Poetry Slam 2015). Before the competition begins, the emcee will bring up a "sacrificial" poet - a guest performer not entered in the competition - who the judges will score in order to calibrate their judging (Aptowicz 2008). The first round at a standard Slam consists of performances by all the poets who registered to compete, with some Slams eliminating the lower scoring poets in successive rounds and some Slams not eliminating poets at all (Aptowicz 2008). Poetry Slams can be individual or team competitions, and in the case of team competitions two or more poets can take the stage in a single round for group poems. At the end of a Slam, the highest scoring poet, or team of poets, wins. Though these rules and procedures are often quite thoroughly adhered to, the Slam tradition has also long included an openly stated ambivalence to the competitive aspect of slamming with the emcees of events often reminding the audience that "the points are not the point; the point is poetry" during Slam events (Poetry Slam Inc. 2015).

As an example of a poem performed at Poetry Slam, I humbly offer the only public performance of my own that I can tolerate looking at. Please see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UJylUuUDA>

Slam as Play

Taylor Mali, one of the most celebrated poets to emerge out of the Slam movement, famously reversed the generous mantra about the point being the poetry to "the points are not the point; the point is to get more points than anyone else" (Poetry Slam Inc. 2015). Though this was undoubtedly a somewhat tongue in cheek statement, not meant to seriously undermine the artistic comradery of "the point is the poetry," there is truth in this quip. In reinforcing the idea that a Poetry Slam is a competition and that the poets do their best to win, Mali evoked an essential aspect of Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutic play.

Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport. (p. 103)

I have felt and sensed in other audience members some disappointment in watching Slam performers not take their turns on stage seriously enough. I once watched a performer exhaust the

audience's patience with a rambling five minute poem (incurring a full 5.5 points worth of deductions) that might have had something to do with the cosmos. His trespass was not so much in performing a poem that was hard to follow, which happens with enough frequency to be fairly forgivable when complex poems are performed out loud, it was in his participating while refusing to "play" by performing such on obviously non-competitive poem. Conversely, having experienced Poetry Slam as a spectator, coach, and competitor, I can attest to the thrill of the competitive conversation when the poets take it seriously. As a poet and as a coach I have endured the intense suspense, and sometimes a slight sinking feeling, of having to follow an especially well-written and well-performed poem. Does one follow a poignant, tragic poem with one that is even sadder? Or does one "change things up" with a funny poem? On the subject of this dilemma, my daughter Emma¹, who was one of the competitors on the team I coached, once crafted a poem that made fun of some of the more maudlin and/or posturing tendencies certain sub genres of slam poems, with lines such as

*Maybe you got the stadium heated with a poem full of
Flaming hip-hop anger,
Presenting your poem
And condemning the norm
Which is ironic, since you can't even form
A rap that doesn't conform
To every tired cliché out there...*
(UCS Spoken Word, 2015)

Despite this poem being well received at noncompetitive open mike readings, it was tough for her to know when she should perform it in competition as it there was a risk that following anyone who had performed even a somewhat clichéd poem with sincerity with her satiric poem might seem mean and be poorly received. When I, as one of her coaches, suggested she perform this poem during the final round of competition in the *Can You Hear Me Now*, she declined, choosing instead a more personal and self-effacing poem that was well received by the judges and audience.

I imagine that the suspense in this final round of the *Can You Hear Me Now* Slam was palpable for everyone in attendance. For heightened connoisseurship and excitement, the volunteer judges from the earlier rounds were replaced with prominent local authors and poets, and the theatre at Lord Beaverbrook High School was nearly at capacity. The level of competition was high as the teams of poets who had shone in earlier rounds of competition went head to head in the final. As a coach, I remember earnestly whispering to my fellow coaches between the performances about our team's poem selections as well as which of our poets we should send up to follow the various competing poets from the other teams. I remember desperately hoping we had made the right choices as I watched our poets take the stage.

¹ With the exceptions of my performance video and one quotation from the published work of an adult poet, in order to showcase some emerging young poets, I have selected all of the exemplary quotations of poetry from adolescent poets who competed at *Can You Hear Me Now*. The poems were all performed at public events and my quotations are taken from publicly available You Tube videos of the performances of these poems at *Can You Hear Me Now* and other venues.

As much as I can attest to the excitement of Slam Poetry as a coach and competitor, I find the thrill of experiencing the “to and fro” competitive conversation as a spectator is almost as intense. For me, and, I think for many audience members, there is an unavoidable sense of being caught up in the moment, similar to what Gadamer (1986), who appreciated tennis as a player as well as a spectator (Dostal 2002), observed about viewers of tennis.

We only have to observe on television the spectators of a tennis match cricking their necks. No one can avoid playing along with the game. (p. 24)

Although a little more time elapses between the verbal “volleys” and “groundstrokes” in Slam Poetry, when the poems stand out in their truth and intensity, the performances in their dynamism, and when the competition is very close, the feeling of being caught up is the same.

Slam as Festival

Drawing on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Freitas (2012) wrote a thesis explaining Poetry Slam as a form of carnival and carnival as a form of resistance. As Freitas (2012) explained

Carnival provides a time and place where the existing social order becomes 'uncrowned' and inverted through the practices of the participants allowing laughter and critique to challenge the dominant discourses. Carnival relies on the participation of everyone at the event to create an alternative social order so that people can relate to each other on an equal basis during the carnival time. (p. 3)

A detailed response to Freitas's claims is beyond the scope of this paper, but this passage does foreshadow aspects of my experiences with Slam Poetry as they might be understood from the vantage of Gadamerian hermeneutics. While I agree with Freitas that both the creation of a unique social order and the opportunity for free critique, or the speaking of truth to power are both essential aspects of the democratic potential of Poetry Slam, I will focus larger claim that Poetry Slam is a festive event.

For Gadamer (1986), the essence of the celebration of festival went beyond the temporary suspension of social roles, though it seems reasonable to suggest that he would have approved of the idea that this was an aspect in the larger essence. In his thinking, festival involved the suspension of temporality itself. Though the scheduling of festivals is obviously dependent on the mundane processes by which we calculate time, the ritual of festival paradoxically depends on the rituals of “arresting” time, “allowing it to tarry,” and even “bringing it to a standstill” (p. 42). Though, ironically, each poem in a Poetry Slam competition is meticulously timed, the larger enterprise still involves the setting aside on the part of the attendees, of an evening, or an entire weekend, to marvel at the power of poetic truth and experience themselves as a part of a common humanity, a whole unit of poetry.

Tradition plays a key role in this. This is most obviously reinforced by how every Poetry Slam is ostensibly governed by similar processes and rules. But beyond this, there are various traditions of audience participation in Slam including the snapping of fingers as a means of expressing approval for an especially poignant line, instead of doing so through applause and potentially

drowning out the line to follow. Throughout a Slam event, the emcees will fire up the audience with the repeated call and respond of “I say poetry, you say rocks!” (Felton 2015). Anti-authoritarian, even regarding the authority that enables the event, the emcee at a Poetry Slam tells the judges not to be swayed by the audience and then in the next breath tells the audience that it is their job to sway the judges with their applause. In perhaps the strangest tradition, reflective of the ambivalence of “the points are not the point,” poets who exceed the time limit are penalized but also formally consoled, and the timekeeper is chastised, when after every time violation the emcee leads the audience in a chant of derision against the timekeeper, “You rat bastard bitch, you’re ruining everything for everyone... but it was well worth it!” (Calgary Spoken Word Society 2015).

If these traditions seem a little silly, it bears mentioning that while the particular Slam ritual only goes back three decades or so, the oral poetry/storytelling tradition and the call and response traditions that often accompany it wind back into antiquity (Mello 2001). Each set of traditions, even in this relatively new art form, builds a familiarity and an expectation around the event. In Poetry Slam, this expectation is that the event will bring forth something true, poignant, and unique. Highlighting the tension between the unique and familiar that festival involves, Gadamer (1986) used the example of Christmas. It is an annual celebration of an event that happened two thousand years ago, and has developed its own unique rituals, and yet every Christmas celebration is different than the last.

Symbol

From a found poem in which Calgary poet and Poetry Slammer Tyler B. Perry (2010) noticed a sign cautioning against disturbing nesting heron chicks and replaced “heron chicks” with students:

*Students often fall
accidentally
or are pushed
by their classmates.
This is a normal occurrence.
You may find
young students on the ground
that are not injured.
This is normal. Please
do not disturb them.
They are learning to fly.*

The currency of poetry is the symbol, and Gadamer (1986) hauntingly, and with great relevance to this discussion, reminded us of the origin of concept of symbol. In the ancient world, a symbol was one piece of a deliberately broken object. It would be given to a guest by his or her host with the host keeping the other matching piece. It represented the hope that the two would meet again, and if they did meet that “the two pieces could be fitted together again to form a whole in an act of recognition” (p. 31). In this sense, the symbol acted as “a sort of pass used in the ancient world: something in and through which we recognize something already known to us” (p. 31).

When the poems at Slams work, they work by this same process. As an audience member I have found myself listening to a poem with growing interest and recognition and then, though the exact moment can be hard to pin down, it has suddenly felt as if two pieces have been joined as the distance between me and the poem collapses. I have found the hairs on my body all standing on end, or my eyes welling up with tears, or uncontrollable laughter possessing me, or a lump of anger at some injustice the poet is describing make itself at home in my chest. It is often a particularly evocative use of figurative language, the use of symbolism, in a poem that gets to me, but even when a poet is being literal, frank, and very honest, the words have the same effect as symbol, the creation of a complete connection. I might not feel any more fractured than usual before an evening of Poetry Slam, but these senses of connection and completion are nevertheless the dominant things I experience when the poems are especially poignant.

Fragmentation

The manner in which slam can build connections between poets and between poets and their audiences is all the more remarkable because there is no dominant age group, nationality, or gender to the people who attend Poetry Slams and no anthem to be written to directly address their shared history. Indeed, the poets who are drawn to Poetry Slam, the style of poems they choose to perform, and the subjects they choose to write about have been described as very diverse (sunsetskyfire, 2014). Aptowicz, in an interview with Erlbaum, (2009) was emphatic about this, having noted “ranting hipsters, freestyle rappers, bohemian drifters, proto-comedians, mystical shamans and gothy punks have all had their time at the top of the Slam food chain” (para. 5). Related to Gadamer’s earlier thoughts on symbol, a unifying feature of Poetry Slam, and its ability to connect with diverse audiences, is the openly stated vulnerability of the poets. Drawing on the wisdom of Aristophanes, as spoken in *Plato’s Symposium*, in a further analysis of symbol, Gadamer (1986) has reminded us of the claim that

(O)riginally all human beings were spherical creatures. But later on, on account of their misbehavior, the gods cut them in two. Thereafter, each of the halves, which originally belonged to one complete living being, seeks to be made whole once again. Thus every individual is a fragment. (pp. 31-32)

Though in *Plato’s Symposium* this myth is told in the context of a conversation specifically about the nature of love, it speaks more broadly to our existential character as beings who endure a sense of constant sense of fragmentation which we are always trying to resolve by connecting to others. In Poetry Slam the sharing of the poets’ vulnerabilities, read metaphorically here as their brokenness, the isolation one feels at the hands of fortune, or is made to feel because of injustice, provides the means by which the poet, and the listeners, who endure their own fragmentations, might feel whole again.

I have seen this phenomenon at play, particularly, in *Can You Hear Me Now* where the adolescent poets offer up the very vulnerabilities that have often been the basis of their feeling fragmented and even marginalized and in doing so, experience empathy, welcome, and inclusion from their fellow poets and the members of the audience. Some notable performances of this nature included Michaela Newman’s “My Therapists Keep Asking About You,” about the suicide of the speaker of the poem’s stepfather and her trauma at the event and the complicated

ways she misses him (Canyouhearmenow 2014) and “Small” by Kristiana Sinding in which the diminutive speaker recalls how, after a frustrating childhood of being the “ *runt of the litter* ” she was, as an adolescent, told that she should be happy to be so small because

*Small girls are desirable
and that I should be glad to be so petite
Because I would be wanted
Because of the inferiority of lesser size
Because men will find me easier to pin, easier to grab, easier to dominate* (2015)

In defiance of this patriarchally insulting compliment the speaker of “Small” then goes on to note, in mock apology, “*sorry buddy but I’m not that into men.*” In Bethel Afework’s (2015) “White Girl,” the speaker lashes out at the hypocrisy of her “keeping it real” peers who mock her for not being “black” enough. “*Call me a white girl one more time, I dare you. Call me an Oreo one more time,*” she challenges (Canyouhearmenow 2015). In all three of these popular poems from the competition the brave recounting of experiences in which fate and/or prejudice made the poets feel particularly, even overwhelmingly fragmented was the basis of the shared feeling of emotional completion between the poets and the audience.

Having noted this, I should point out that while some of the best received Slam poems are about very damaging experiences that the poets endured, the poems do need not be this intense to draw an empathetic reaction. Well-crafted poems about smaller sufferings are well received too. Popular poems at *Can You Hear Me Now* also included Brianna Lynn’s eponymous poem in which the speaker worries that her life is too boring to write a good slam poem about (Canyouhearmenow 2014) and my daughter Emma’s “Adorable,” in which the speaker insists that her frilly style of dress and appreciation of artistic make up styles is a sign of confidence and not its lack (UCS Spokenword 2015).

I can attest to this feeling of emotional completion as a poet as well as a spectator. On the adult circuit my three most personal poems, about my frustrations with the special education labelling system in Alberta and my own time in school dealing with a perceptual/motor skills disability, my introversion, and my fears of coming down with Alzheimer’s as many of my relatives have, while being the most difficult to share have also been the ones that were best received by the audience. Moreover, I felt the greatest sense of communion with the audience and my fellow poets, through their supportive listening, enthusiastic applause, and through the conversations many took the time to have with me after they heard the poems.

When Slam Doesn’t Play Well

I do not mean to overly romanticize Poetry Slam in this discussion. While Poetry Slam can, as I have claimed, reveal (and revel in) an artistic communion, this does not mean that it always does. There are many things that can thwart its hermeneutic transactions. Without some measure of poetic craft, the recounting of a performer’s painful experiences can come off more as a primal scream, perhaps therapeutic for the speaker but shrill and alienating for the audience. As one of my fellow slammers remarked to me, some audiences can be too easily won over, snapping their fingers in approval of familiar clichés like “you have to live every moment like it’s your last”

instead of original and honest writing. Judges can fall to this tendency too, and in a similar vein can favor particularly dynamic performers instead of attending equally to the craft of the poems. As Mali remarked in jest, sometimes the points do become the point for some of the performers in an excessive way and, when the competitive aspect is highlighted disputes ensue more frequently about the fairness of the competition, the quality of the judging, the quality of this or that poet, and the competence of the organizers. While these sorts of complaints unflatteringly emphasize the competitive aspect of Poetry Slam, they can also be rightful criticisms of the fairness of the events. The tendency towards “score creep” where - regardless of the quality of the poetry the scores get higher and higher over the course of the evening, to the disadvantage of earlier poets - is such a common problem that it has its own name and is even mentioned as part of Poetry Slam vocabulary in several books on Poetry Slam (Aptowicz 2008; Somers-Willet 2009). Despite the democratic corrective Aptowicz (2008) mentioned, that any time a certain style of Slam Poetry seems to be at the “top of the food chain,” another style lays in waiting to overtake it, particular styles can become wearisome in the moment. Another poet friend of mine has described his recent aversion to performances in the currently favored style involving the rapid delivery of cleverly connected words, with cadence that gives the suggestion that they are stream of consciousness occurrences, accompanied by aggressive gesturing. Despite his admission that many of the poets who have this style are very talented, he has told me the style has become a barrier to his connection with their work. While it would be overreaching to claim these as beneficial aspects of Poetry Slam, in the hermeneutic sense imperfections are part of what gives an event its character. Moules (2002) has reminded us that Hermes, the messenger God hermeneutics is named after, does not always play nicely. He is a “trickster [with] with the character of complication, multiplicity, lies, jokes, irreverence, indirection, and disdain for rules,” (p. 3). Similarly, Gadamer (2004) has explained that a game consists of much more than the individual agency of its players, “It is the game itself that plays,” (p. 484). Thus, in a larger sense, the sorts of problems that emerge in Poetry Slam can be seen as Slam itself playing somewhat capriciously with the same participants it sometimes rewards with truth, communion, and conviviality.

Conclusion

It seems to me that Gadamer (2004) would have been sympathetic to the contention that for poetry to fully reach its potential to be meaningful that it has to be performed. Describing dramatic performance, he wrote

We have shown above that this kind of reproduction is not a second creation re-creating the first; rather, it makes the work of art appear as itself for the first time. (p. 400)

I have experienced this on a practical level. When I was preparing to perform at my first Slams, I chose some poems that I had written long before I had ever heard of these events. As I started to rehearse them, with the advice of a more experienced (and more skilled) poet, I discovered that they were too wordy as I’d originally written them. It was not possible to perform impactful readings of these poems without editing for concision, and I found the best way to edit was to practice performing the poems to test the effectiveness of any changes I was considering. I changed them further after public performances, using the “conversations” between my perfor-

mances and the audience reactions and apparent understandings to enhance my meaning. My poems were not fully themselves until I had crafted them through performance.

There are many, particularly in the academic community, who do not share the appreciation that I, and Poetry Slam's many participants and spectators have for the activity (Somers-Willet 2009). Harold Bloom (in Somers-Willet 2009) famously dismissed the entire genre of Poetry Slam with his complaint that

I can't bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and non-sense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art. (p. 21)

I feel that Bloom, and other scholars with similar opinions have misunderstood Poetry Slam's potential. We live in an era where many feel that the pace and volume of text itself has become a threat. Scholars worry that the distracting onslaught of words we subject ourselves to on social media and in our professional lives is "bad for our brains" (Levitin 2015), and is eroding our ability to empathize (Williams 2015). Poetry Slam provides opportunity to re-engage with, concentrate deeply on, and tarry over language as an event. In its festive aspect and in its fostering of human connection, Poetry Slam has reminded us that poetry is "play" and, moreover that it is the kind of "play" many of us need to feel more connected. As "play" tends to, it at times looks silly. But it is also deadly serious.

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