Reading Poetry Slam: Body as Poetic Text - Andrea Gibson, "I do"

Seo In Cho

Graduate Student of
English Literature,
Ewha Womans University, Seoul

Abstract: Poetry slams have recently received critical attention in relation with troubadour tradition, beat generation and Harlem Renaissance. A few studies have analyzed some poems of poetry slams and most of them have set apart script from performance. However we have to pay attention to the performance which is mainly paralinguistic expressions to understand a slam poem comprehensively. A performed poem is distributed not as a written text but as a movie clip that contains the performer's paralanguage expressions as well as linguistic contents of the poem. The key questions in this respect are: 1) what kind of factors do we consider here and 2) how are multi-sensory poetic words organizedand how can we analyze these works academically. To amplify on the first question, the theater semiotics of Anne Ubersfeld will be partially applied. For the second question, this paper will discuss Andrea Gibson's "I do" performances based on an analysis of details selected according to the answers of the first question.

Recently, poetry slams have received much critical attention and now are on the road to success. Poetry slams are competitive poetry performances in which participants recite their poem in the form of rap. Slams started with Mark Smith, an American poet who rapped his poem at one jazz bar of Chicago in 1984 (Kim 251). Many scholars approach slam poetry in relation with the troubadour tradition and regard it as a descendent from music poetry like Allen Ginsberg's of the beat generation or Langston Hughes's of the Harlem Renaissance, because of its form of rap, its social critical contents, and colloquial words. Music poetry indicates poetry with musical factors such as distinctive musical forms or historical contexts of a genre as well as repetitive rhythm and meter (Tockgo 1). Poetry slams are recognized as a full-fledged genre and even the *American Literature* anthology includes this genre in the contemporary poetry section.

Scholars have often noted a rise in poetry slams as an interesting phenomenon in literary genre but have rarely studied how it actually works as a literary art. Much scholarly work has assessed poetry slam as only a cultural phenomenon reflecting digital media development. Though a few studies have analyzed some poems of poetry slams, most of them have set apart script from performance. One reason belletristic approach and holistic analysis are few is that people tend to think of poetry recitation as a subsidiary method to understanding and enjoying a poem better.

Samuel R. Levin insists that oral performances force the performer to choose only one meaning among many of them that people can derive from ambiguous words or homophones

of the poem; therefore, oral performances tend to simplify the complexity of a poem and fail to convey the richness of the poem to audiences (366-369). When we consider that Joan Peskin's experiment in 1998 shows that the actual reading strongly reflects the performer's academic interpretation (235-263), Levin's idea seems to be invalid.

However Levin and Peskin's perspectives do not fit poetry slams. Both have dealt with only oral performances as a subsidiary activity that represents written poetry text. We must note here that poetry slams are multi-sensuous performances and the performance itself is the form of the poem. The author's first display and later distributions of his poem are not in the written form but in performance which contains the mise-en-scène. Details of a performance are carefully directed by a poet and present the poet's actual intention. Thus, poetry slam performances should be considered not as representation of a poem but as a multi-sensory poem presented by the poet's body. In this respect, each detail of performance does not simplify the meaning of poetic words and the poem but constructs the meaning, the poetic words themselves.

One should pay attention to multi-sensory characteristics of a poetry slam's poetic words not to lose totality through a belletristic approach, i.e., one should consider various factors that make a poetic word. Then, the first key question is what and how many factors we have to considerto organize the multi-sensory poetic word. A poetry slam's poetic words usually consist of paralinguistic factors and linguistic texts. According to Anne Ubersfeld's theater semiotics in *L'ecole du Spectateur*, there are three types of signs used by actors:

1. Intentional signs: Directed. For example, vocalization, theatrical gesture

2. Intentional signs: Actor-oriented. For example, facial expression, emotional expression, habit of expression which is repeated by actors

3. Unintentional signs: Actor-oriented. For example, gender, appearance, race, etc. (239)

In this essay, I will deal with only the intended signs because what we will approach is "poetic words," an art.

The next question is how they actually become together a poetic word and how we can analyze their works academically. The factors work in combination to form a round poetic word as they make discordance or accordance in between which generates poetic ambiguity or clarity of poetic words. Also, the factors directly expand sympathy among audiences by their intimate function. The expanded sympathy forms instant and single-prolonged social community in participants including performer and audiences; this also generates poetic ambiguity or clarity to help people form a thematic discourse.

To amplify on this issue, I select a performance of "I do" by Andrea Gibson, an award-winning slam poet, to analyze its poetic words. I compared four different video recordings of "I do" performances to distinguish and extract intentional signs of the "I do" performer. I selected two details of performance to analyze as its poetic words: first, this poem's song and second, "you." These two parts are where the signs are largely concentrated

Figure 1. Music of a song at the beginning of the poem "I do"

and both function as crucial poetic words which construct the main theme of the poem. I add some pictures which are captures of the recording in 2007.[1]

"I do" is about the love and trouble of a lesbian couple and the speaker wonders if they can be together when one is dying. A Poem "I do" starts with a Song and ends with the Song. This Song is a poetic word which has five components of performance: in order of importance, melody, linguistic text, vocalization, gesture, and facial expression. Oral performance plays a central role in this song. Melody and Linguistic text form the basic identity of the song, and the rest three components make variations on poetic meaning of the song.

Figure 2. Music of a song at the ending of the poem "I do"

This song is composed of scat and short melody with the lyrics of "I do." The melody is the same and even scat has the same notes in every performance. Singing gives an actual shape to the music of the song and makes the song accepted as an independent word. Linguistic text, in other words, the lyrics, is combined with following lines performed after the song at the beginning and adds poetic identity to the word, "song." The Song's lyrics are of three types: scat type 1 of "Babidibabidibaba…, Dipdidipdidip…"; scat type 2 of "Dengedengdenge…, Dingdongding…"; and the melody parts. Scat type 1 is based on pronunciation of plosive with stress on the first syllable. This is functioning as onomatopoeia representing the sound of the cardiograph, which one can analogize by the following lines: "And I want to know that fifty years from now when you're in a hospital room getting ready to die, when visiting hours are for family members only, I want to know they'll let me in to say goodbye." Scat type 2 is based on the nasal sound with stress on the first syllable. This is also onomatopoeia, but this time it represents the sound of "church bells" at a wedding ceremony as the speaker says, "the most we can hope for is an uncivil union in Vermont. But I want church bells. I want rosary beads. I want Jesus on his knees. I want to walk down the aisle while all the patriarchy smiles." Melody 1's lyrics of "I do" are best reflected in the title of this poem and therefore is a main message of this poem. "I do" is first related to the marriage oath and next to the speaker's hope of being with her lover as her spouse, singing a song to say good-bye to her.

Thus, the song becomes a kind of theme music, i.e., the basic identity as a poetic word indicating the speaker's hope for being family-in-law. Here, the basic meaning of the song vocalization and gesture make the variation-in-use of the poetic word. Audiences take the song at the poem's beginning and the song at the poem's ending as the same song because they have the same components. But the song has slightly different meanings as indicated by the poet's vocalization and gestures.
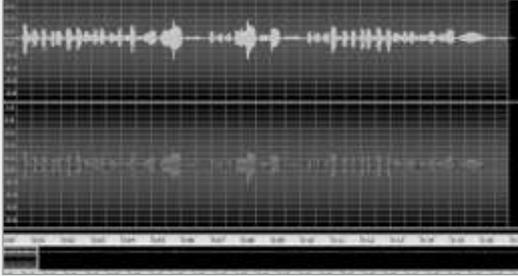
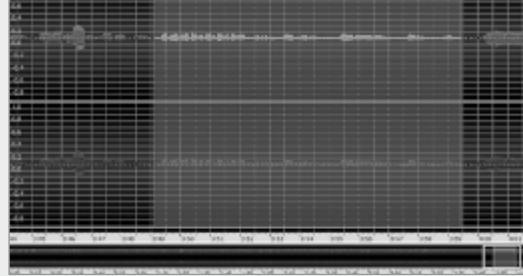Figure 3. Waveform of the song at the beginning

Figure 4. Waveform of the song at the ending

Figure 3 shows the waveform of the song at the poem's beginning and Figure 4 shows the waveform of the song at the poem's end. The range of Figure 3's waveform reaches a maximum of 0.4, but that of Figure 4 reaches a maximum of 0.2. The poet sings at the beginningalmost twice as loudly than at the end. When singing the song at the end of the poem, the poet's voice gradually dies away. One can barely distinguish melody from caesura from the waveform of Figure 4. Considering Figure 1 and 2, the scale goes down at the end and the voice fading out has multilayered meanings:

1. Disappointment at being denied as family member and having no positive answer to her wish
2. Sorrow of letting lover go and saying good bye

In addition to the vocal change, the song in combination with gesture acquires another meaning. While singing, the poet does two kinds of gestures: one is closing her eyes and the other is changing the angle of her face and body.

Figure 5. Singing at the beginning

Figure 6. Singing at the ending

The poet closes her eyes when singing at both the beginning and the end. She does not look at the audience and concentrates on her inner self and emotion, indicating that the song has no audience but herself, or has a listener, her lover, who is not on the stage but in her mind, as though the audience is listening to an interior monologue. When singing at the end, the poet, her eyes closed, simultaneously changes her posture, contrasting with the opened one with her face upward into the closed one with her face downward as Figure 6 shows. The changing posture imitates the actual situation that she is by her lover's deathbed and conveys her disappointment and sorrow. Therefore, the performer "I" shows her holding on to the hope that she can do this in reality. Though the poem ends with "good bye," the gay issue is now an ongoing process.

Facial expressions accord meaning to the text, enhanced by the vocalization, gestures and emotion indicated in the songs at the beginning and the end. The comfortable smile confirms the loud and hopeful atmosphere of the beginning song, but her smiling face turns into a grave one at the end, showing her deep sorrow and disappointment.

To sum up, the meanings of all five components of the song, the song as a poetic word has meaning as follows: the song embodies marriage and the lover's death. Both are strongly related to the speaker's hope that she wants to be a spouse legally. The poet first sings hopefully but later sings gravely to show her deep sorrow for lost hope. Nevertheless, she is hopeful. This song is a song of hope and sorrow that every lesbian has in her mind. If this song

exists in only written linguistic text, what we will recognize are just the typographical lyrics which do not tell us how the speaker sings, whether it is actually sung by the speaker in real or in her mind, to whom speaker sings and with what kind of emotion she sings. The song is the most poetic word in the poem "I do."

The next important detail of performance to analyze is "you." If the song has an internal characteristic, "you" is the external characteristic because of its referential function. "You" is apoetic word referring to the "listener" of the speaker "I" and the word has two components of performance: linguistic text and gesture. Both are equally important. In the case of "you," both linguistic text and gesture remain ambiguities of each component.

"You" itself tell us only that it is a pronoun. To know the linguistic text, one should interweave examples of "you" used in "I do" to see each context. "You" first appears in the line "cause you are a girl, I am a girl" very soon after the song at the beginning ends. At this point, "you" indicates the speaker's lover for most of the poem, but a slightly different meaning of "you" comes in the lines depicting their lives after moving to Kansas. The speaker says, "I cut your cord and you cut mine, and the chords of time played like a concerto of hope like we could feel the rope unwind, feel the noose of hate loosening, loosening from years of 'People like you aren't welcome here, people like you can't work here, people like you cannot adopt.'" In these lines, "you" indicates not only the speaker's lover but also the speaker herself. The speaker recalls a past time before they lived in Kansas when they were rejected just because they were gay. Thus, literally, the poet is using a word "you" to mean two meanings: one is the speaker's lover only and the other are both the lovers.

The literal meaning is the basic identity of "you." The gestures make the variation-in-use on the basic meaning. First, at the line "cause you are a girl, I am a girl," the poet directly points at the audience when saying "you" as Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7. Pointing at the audience, "you" (left) and "I" (right)

Here "you" literally indicates the speaker's lover, but the poet's gesture indicates the audience. The poet positions the audience as her lover. Also, the poet points at the audience when saying "you" at the line "People like you aren't welcome here, people like you can't work here, people like you cannot adopt."

Figure 8. Pointing at the audience, "People like you" lines

Here "you" indicates both the speaker and her lover, but the poet indicates the audience. The poet's gesture of pointing at the audience with "you" gives a generalized aspect to the personal statement represented by "I" and "you." This gesture expands the range of subjectsfor "you" in the poem to unspecified individuals and directly puts them in the position of lesbians who are lovers but held in contempt by society. As a result, each audience member is forced to take a position regarding lesbian matters or at least has to think about it. Finger pointing,

which seems to simply identify friend and foe, actually deconstructs the totality of real audiences to reconstruct an instant place for discourse about the gay marriage and patriarchic family among the audience.

Various components like gestures, vocalization, facial expression, and linguistic text dynamically interact with each other, not to simplify the meaning of a poem but rather to clarify and even generate multilayered meanings in combination as poetic words do in a written poem. Thus, to set apart script from the whole performance of a poetry slam and analyze only the script is to look at only one dimension of the poem and lose the abundance of meanings in the poem.

Research of this viewpoint is still in its early stage and some problems remain that need to be explored. First, one can easily accept poetry slams as a more dramatic genre. Because of its multi-genre characteristic, I borrowed drama theory to approach various factors of performance. It is true that the performance aspect of poetry slams havemuch in common with drama, but, as I have said at the beginning of this paper, the origin of poetry slamsis in the tradition of poetry. Besides, the poetry slam's performers are not actors but the poets themselves. Additionally, based on my argument that the poet's body is the text for the poem and the poetic words are presented by the body, a poem becomes completely different if the performer is changed. It is not like in drama where the original is shared as scenes and all performance is real. A poetry slam has only several original versions performed by the poet; others can only possibly make duplications or create an entirely new poem.

Certainly, the present paper was limited in scope. I dealt with only one poem of a poet and chose only two kinds of multi-linguistic poetic words of the poem. The components of the poetic words are all intended. One can analyze unintended components like biological characteristics or habits also as a sign which affects a poem's meaning. However, the actual analysis will be huge and complex, requiring an interweaving of a large amount of knowledge of various scientific areas in poetry analysis. Further studies of different large scale assessments are needed. This paper was an attempt to provide an impetus for accepting all factors of the performance of poetry slams as poetic diction that we can analyze literarily.

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Notes

1. Live performance at Girl Fest, Hawaii. Gibson published "I do" also in audio CD *When the Bough Breaks in* 2006.

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