

Invading Stages: Interview with Pete Bearder and Review of his *Stage Invasion: Poetry & The Spoken Word Renaissance*

Review of Pete Bearder, *Stage Invasion: Poetry & The Spoken Word Renaissance*. London: OutSpoken Press 2019.

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In October 2019 I have the opportunity to talk to Pete Bearder about his recent book *Stage Invasion: Poetry & The Spoken Word Renaissance*. To the backdrop of a railway station in the UK we delve into some of the issues that his book has raised for me. As we talk, we are surrounded by the rampant consumerism and profiteering promoted by the privatisation of what was once a public, not-for-profit space. The time and space of reflection we carve out and performatively create through conversation in a cafe that sells the simulacrum of benign bourgeois comfort, has more in common with the location of our previous meeting, which took place on a mountain during a festival where I saw Bearder – then in his role as the poet Pete the Temp – stage an interactive performance for children and teenagers, sharing the stage with protagonists of various ages. All of them together created a momentous example of poetic-political education and expression.

The felt tension between these two situated encounters and its resolution by way of the playfulness of shared reflection resonates with the poetic and intellectual landscape of spoken word poetry that Bearder outlines in *Stage Invasion*. ‘Capitalism’, Bearder states in the very beginning of our conversation, ‘is taking away our most intrinsic resources, which are time and space.’ Spoken word poetry can be – and often is – one way of reclaiming them. In *Stage Invasion* Bearder shows how it does that, and how listeners of spoken word poetry can engage with and meaningfully respond to such reclaiming.

Within the rich field of study and a wide range of publications on Performance and Spoken Word Poetry in the English language that has emerged over the past 15 years, Bearder’s *Stage Invasion* takes a unique place because few publications bridge the gap between the critical reflection of practitioners and the analytical reflection of academic specialists with such refreshingly light-hearted, intellectually passionate and experientially sure-footed competence. *Stage Invasion* is intellectually challenging and fun to read. From the perspective of a practitioner who is thoughtful and reflexive about the poetics of his poetic movement Bearder lays the groundwork for a shared analytical practice to foster and grow spoken word poetry.

The title and subtitle of *Stage Invasion* establish a playful field of forces which holds as a framework throughout the book, subtly and metonymically inviting the kind of exploratory questions Bearder addresses in the eight chapters: why is the stage being ‘invaded’? Does the ‘&’ in the subtitle suggest a complementary or a conflictual relationship between poetry and the spoken word? If we move ‘poetry’ ever so slightly within the sentence, the ‘spoken word’ turns into ‘spoken word poetry’ – does this mean that ‘poetry’ and the ‘spoken word’ are coming together, or does one tug at the other? And then there is the term ‘Renaissance’, loaded with the aspirations, pretensions and crimes of Western cultures.

Bearder covers a wide range of manifestations of spoken word poetry in the English language, mostly from England. He starts with two chapters on the significance of the format of slam poetry as a sociological point of entry into the practice of poetry and an exploration of ‘What is Spoken Word Poetry?’ In the first chapter, on Slam as a practice of poetic gate crashing of high-brow, elitist and traditional poetry he develops a poetic-sociological understanding of slam as a counter-movement and

as a type of autonomous and communitarian apprenticeship for poets outside of – and beyond – the academized and formalized creative writing circuit. In chapter 2, ‘What is spoken word poetry?’ he takes an approach based on the practice and experience of spoken word poetry. From this he extrapolates an understanding of what spoken word poetry is and means based on its concrete, socially and situationally embedded manifestations, rather than academized or fixed definitions. As he points out in conversation, poetry can never be separated from its social context; spoken word poetry inhabits and contributes to its context by creating a space, holding it, and by creating moments of collective empathy.

The Social Poetics of Spoken Word Poetry

Chapter 3 and 4 go into this social context by engaging with what I would term ‘the social poetics of spoken word poetry.’ In chapter 3 Bearder provides ‘a brief history of democratic literary movements’, mostly focusing on movements from the U.K. and the U.S. which provide the historical inspirations for contemporary spoken word poetry. Bearder goes into greater detail on the popular and revolutionary poets of the Romantic era, on the educational project of the Chartists, on Modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Poets, the British Beats and the Liverpool poets, the Black Arts Movement, Dub Poetry, Hip Hop, British Punk poetry, and UK alternative cabaret. These individuals and movements share a poetic-political project in that they challenge hegemonic power through poetry, and through the embedding of their poetry within social and political movements and historical moments.

I especially appreciated the sections on British Punk poetry and on UK alternative cabaret, both of which have received very little attention and who are also, interestingly, among the poetic movements that least rely on individualist protagonism. Bearder makes a strong case for the significance of Punk poetry in particular and especially emphasizes the courage and steadfastness it took for poets to put poetry on stages usually dominated by bands – a ‘stage invasion’ different to the ones he describes as acts of rebellion against the neoliberalized cultural environment of the 21st century in the second half of the book. In Punk Poetry poets stood up not for or with, but *to* their audiences – especially women poets. In the section on cabaret Bearder introduces poets who combined the fierceness of the punk poets with a wild, transgressive, iconoclastic socio-political humour which ‘delivered anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-Tory material with punk enthusiasm’ (p. 121).

In the last chapter of this first part of the book, on ‘The DIY Renewal of Poetry’, Bearder highlights the role of independent venues and of organizers. Their role in what he characterizes as a do-it-yourself movement, he argues, can only be crucial. Bearder identifies two main tasks for them. The first is about setting up, running and maintaining spaces where spoken word poetry can be performed, listened to, and learned about; the second is about creating and finding some form of a shared consensus of a ‘poetics’ for spoken word poetry. Bearder pursues two lines of argument, organized around the distinction between horizontal and vertical links. The former focuses on links among the scene; the latter on the relationship between what he terms the ‘grass roots’ of spoken word poetry and institutions. While educational institutions like schools and community organisations are well represented among the ones he mentions, universities are pretty much absent, and Bearder makes it clear that in the light of funding cuts to the arts and education, these vertical links are in the process of withering away.

The Grounding of Spoken Word Poetry

The second part of the book explores the grounding of spoken word poetry in the poet’s body, in the audience’s affects, in ecstatic states shared by the poet and audiences, and in the political practice of protest movements. These chapters introduce elements of affect theory, and then, in the last chapter on ‘Poetry, Protest and Political Renewal’, re-emphasize the grounding in protest.

These four chapters explore different aspects of what Bearder considers an intrinsic characteristic of spoken word poetry: emotional literacy. He describes this as the formation of a cadre of poets who can be trusted with audiences: listeners are ‘physical entities, they’re not just minds with legs.’ Similarly, poetry is ‘a resonating body of flesh’ (p. 190), grounded in the poet’s body or, as he puts it, in the ‘topography of the flesh’ (p. 191). The poet emerges as a facilitator, as someone with a special sensitivity for the energies and vibes at work in his audience who then channels these energies into a communal experience. In this context we touch on the relationship between U.S. and U.K. forms of spoken word poetry. British culture, Bearder argues, is traditionally not very good at creating space for the expression of emotions and feelings. U.S. culture, he argues, is more emotionally literate and U.K. spoken word poetry culture learned from the U.S. spoken word scene to be more aware and attentive of the potential impact of their poems on audiences; an awareness that is for example expressed in trigger warnings.

In conversation we reflect on the implications these shifts can have for critical responses to spoken word poems that now mostly use the first person, hold that poetry should be political by being personal (as Bearder aptly puts it), and almost always understand the relationship to the environment through the individual. An audience reaction that expresses ‘dislike’ for, or disconnection from a poem can be easily misunderstood as a rejection of or disrespect for the person and their experience. This constitutes a marked shift from performance poetry from the 1970s and 1980s, when poems tended to either speak about poets’ communities in the first place, or when poets saw their poetry as embedded within shared experiences, whether these were of a joyful nature such as carnivalistic celebration, or painful and scathing such as police brutality and discrimination. A critical response to a poem with that type of grounding could hardly be interpreted as a personal rejection; if at all, a critical response articulated from an inappropriate position could be dismissed, ignored or rejected.

Poets with that grounding did not necessarily want their poems to be ‘liked’ widely. In fact, some poets were perfectly fine with their poetry being disliked by certain people. Politically positioned poets like LKJ or Benjamin Zephaniah might very well feel insulted had their poetry been liked by Tories, fascists or those they would have identified as members of the cultural elites. Other poets stood their ground in the face of rejection and derision, for example the women punk poets mentioned by Bearder who had things thrown at them by some audience members, or the ‘Queen of Dub’ Jean ‘Binta Breeze’ who was targeted by engrained sexism in the Dub community.¹ Despite this they persevered and eventually spearheaded deep shifts and transformations regarding the sexism and misogyny then inherent in punk and dub culture. However, the spaces in which they performed could not be considered ‘safe spaces’ and this, Bearder points out, meant that certain issues – such as mental health issues – which can today be addressed thanks to collective agreements on safe spaces and the ritual of the MC, could probably not have been addressed in any meaningful way on 1970s and 1980s stages.

It may be social fragmentation that enforces a grounding of poetry in the poet’s body and the instantaneous moment of the performance, much along the lines of the affects explored by Bearder in the second half of the book. The problematic aspect of this is, as Bearder puts it, that ‘To really consider something, to really decompress it and really stretch it and really understand it, you have to move beyond the Me Me Me poetry. You have to move beyond the Self to understand that actually, yes, I’m hurt, yes, I’ve overcome something, but I’m also part of a super-ego, a social Self, an ecological Self, a wider thing, I’m a twig in a river. And that is what this hyper-individuality of the U.S. spoken

1 See Cornelia Gräbner, ‘Poetic Licence and Direct Address. Political Performance Poetry in Britain.’ In Uwe Klawitter and Claus-Ulrich Viol (Eds.), *Contemporary Poetry in Britain and Ireland*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013, pp. 205-228.

word culture doesn't often give us. Perhaps we've had that in more unapologetically oppositional poetry of the past in this country, where there was [a sense of] yes, I'm part of a social movement, yes, this event is part of a wider collective struggle.' The question might be whether poets can feel themselves as a twig in a river without feeling unsafe or threatened by the river, and whether they would want to be a twig in a river. Considering this complex, unresolved relationship between the collective, the individual and the personal, Bearder points out the need for critical responses and readings from those who are not entangled within the scene, and for dialogues between those who are and those who are not part of the scene: 'There has been a problem of reviewing because everyone is so cosy, everyone knows each other, we're all from the same room. So there are some real dangers that it leans towards uncritical acceptance, and it's particularly a danger in a performing art form where it's based on personal disclosure and personal experience, especially with this new emotionally literate poetic which is currently *en vogue*.' If the art form wants to grow, he argues, it needs criticality.

One element of Bearder's approach might offer another possible way forward from this situation. Throughout the book and without commenting on this explicitly, Bearder frequently speaks of poets in their 'roles', for examples as orator, activist or ecstatic preacher' (see p. 305). Another one of these roles would be the poet as educator. These roles are historically grown and socially embedded; they are thus not necessarily an individual choice or desire, and they cannot be enacted without some sort of consensus or contract with a community. Because a role can never fully encompass a person's identity, Bearder's combination of affective and social grounding of spoken word poetry effectively precludes a happy marriage between emotional intelligence and hyper-individuality within spoken word poetry as he understands it.

Invasions

The term 'invasion' in the title of the book, Bearder explains, refers to two aspects of spoken word poetry. The first is the invasion of traditional forms of poetry by stylistic elements that come from other art forms, especially music and live performance. He names 'musicality, pause and pace' as the most significant. The second invasion refers to the infiltration of the literary canon by spoken word poetry.

The spoken word practices Bearder refers to throughout *Stage Invasion* point to a third 'invasive' force: poets' and activists' incursions into stages or places that are not usually considered appropriate to poetry. Examples of this include the invasion of sites by activists and activist-poet such as coal mines during an occupation of the Hambach coal mine in Germany in 2017², activists' invasion of the Shakespearean stage in Stratford-uppon-Avon in 2012 to poetically denounce the fossil fuel company BP's campaign at whitewashing its image through sponsorship of the arts³, and the occupation of Fortnum and Mason in London in 2011 by activists denouncing tax evasion, after which poet Danny Chivers was fined GBP 2300 for 'aggravated trespass'. Part of the 'evidence' consisted of CCTV footage which showed Chivers reciting the poem 'Shop a Scrounger' in what the Judge described as 'a ranting and polemic style' (p. 271)⁴. In collecting such material *Stage Invasion* carries out an important act of documenting the intersections of contemporary poetry and protest.

The term 'invasion' is particularly useful because of its resonances with the historical moment of the 20th and 21st century. It highlights that poets and protesters take these spaces without asking for permission from those in power. This practice, I would argue, is the 21st response to the unwillingness of those in power to be responsive when poets and activists engaged in less invasive practices such as denunciation, negotiation, demonstration, and blockade in the late 1990s and early noughties. In the

2 See <https://hambachforest.org/?noredirect=en_US> for further information.

3 See <<https://bp-or-not-bp.org/>> for further information.

4 See <<https://vimeo.com/17295443>> for a video of Chivers performing the poem.

case of the UK in particular the foundations for occupational tactics were laid by those in power when they refused to obey the people's demands after the massive demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq and culturally, when the neoliberal cultural apparatus responded with appropriation to the demand for a renewal of poetic language and practices. On a global scale we might think of the massive anti-summit demonstrations of the alterglobalisation movement, which those in power reacted to with tear gas, police violence and mediatic slander, instead of a positive response appropriate to the scale of the issues denounced, such as climate change. 'Protest', Bearder says, 'is about growing power, not about validating the system.' The function of protest and of demonstrations, we agree, is now no longer the articulation of a demand but rather, the coming together of people under shared demands, much in line with the Invisible Committee's exhortation to 'Find each Other!' The concept of 'invasion' in its poetic and political dimensions is one of Bearder's especially relevant and useful contributions to an appropriate listening and response to 21st century committed and positioned spoken word poetry in the age of neoliberal disaster capitalism.

Stage Invasion makes an important contribution to the existing literature on spoken word poetry, and it opens up a wide range of diverse possibilities for responses and intellectual and poetic developments and dialogues. Hopefully Bearder's invitation will be taken up widely.