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## Review

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# The *Word Hoard*

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## Review

*Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance.* Julia Novak. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2011. 271pp. €32.

There have been numerous positive reviews of Julia Novak's *Live Poetry*, a handful of which are cited on the book's companion website, [www.livepoetry.net](http://www.livepoetry.net). Reviewers applaud *Live Poetry* as a "fresh," "important," or "unprecedented" intervention in current poetry criticism, a corrective to critics' pernicious textual partisanship or puritanism. Novak observes these critics granting precedence, for example, to the published poem as the definitive version or to the written poem as the originary script for a reading or a performance. Suitably, then, reviewers commend Novak's defence of, in her terms, "oral performance as a basic realisation mode of the art of poetry, which is parallel to, rather than a mere derivative 'version' of, the written mode" (12).

*Live Poetry* reaches for comprehensiveness, drawing analytic tools from paralinguistics, musicology, kinesics, as well as theatre, performance, and folklore studies in order to address the numerous imbricated aspects of performed poetry. Such aspects include verbal and non-verbal articulations, preambles and asides, bodily communication, and the participatory, generic, and spatio-temporal contexts of performance. The study is devised

for quick reference, with analytic approaches and tools dispersed into isolated sections and subsections. Novak's terminal "Checklist for the Analysis of Live Poetry Performances" acts as a field guide, asserting live poetry as a cohesive, if interdisciplinary, object of critical research.

In all of these respects, Novak's study is timely (or a bit overdue), competently written, and eminently accessible as a beginner's guide to live poetry. While Novak focuses exclusively on live poetry in the United Kingdom, her methodology is ostensibly applicable to live poetry as a general art form across geopolitical contexts. I urge you to read some of the aforementioned positive reviews for more detail on what's good (indeed, what's great) about *Live Poetry*. Below, I'll focus on two related problems with the study's conception: first, an archivally inflected presumption that criticism benefits its object; and second, a focus on methodological objectivity that displaces what's actually at stake in live poetry and its study.

### **An archival problem**

Novak opens her introduction by refuting the cliché of poetry as a genre in crisis, citing its "renaissance through the spoken word," apparent in a profusion of performance

events ranging from traditionally conceived “readings” and open mics to festivals and poetry slams (11). Yet the language of literary criticism is often that of crisis-and-intervention—positive criticism saves art from ignorance and negative criticism saves particular standards of taste from ignorance—and, accordingly, Novak describes her own project as an intervention into the derogation of live poetry (i.e., an art form) by academic and aesthetic conservatives (i.e., those who are ignorant of its artistic ways and means).

Although some critics depend on a nearly sacred conception of textuality to declaim live poetry as derivative of or lower brow than “page poetry,” it’s hardly fair for Novak to generalize this opinion as the mainstream of poetry criticism. Anyone still treating *the* poem as the isolated transcription of genius isn’t attending to the most interesting aspects of contemporary *written* poems either, which cannot be aptly read in the garret of their textuality because they are free-ranging and quasi-textual in their borrowed contexts and emphatic linguistic unoriginality. (Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing*, for all its absurd prescriptivism, is useful for its description of this late twentieth- and twenty-first-century trend in American poetry.) But were this straw “page poetry critic” a reality, would its threat to live poetry communities be any greater than that of a dwindling rear guard in someone else’s skirmish? It seems not, for if live poetry communities in the UK are distinguished from the long tradition of poetry “readings” by their “willingness to concede to live poetry an aesthetic value independent of print” (11), as Novak claims, then live poetry communities, by definition, validate their art

to themselves. Live poetry self-perpetuates, crusty critics be damned.

So, simply, this crisis of live poetry’s derogation is a crisis of and for criticism: the fact that “poetry performances are hardly ever reviewed” results in “the lack of historical documentation and of a critical language” for live poetry (11-12). If Novak’s formulation doesn’t merely beg the question (suggesting, as it does, that live poetry *is not* adequately celebrated in written reviews because it *has not been* adequately celebrated in written reviews), it at least acknowledges that written critical discourse runs on a different circuit from that of its putative object. This we know. The necessary question for *Live Poetry* is whether those circuits intersect in a meaningful or beneficial way. Does *live* poetry require *written* criticism to flourish? Evidently not. So, do live poetry communities have sufficient (non-academic or non-written) resources to produce, circulate, and comment on their own aesthetic traditions—that is, to maintain their own histories of taste? Do these communities require conventionally understood “standards of taste” or “histories” in order to produce live poetry? Or, to tweak the terms slightly, *how* is live poetry perpetuated (or not) through its own forms and in its own terms? How does this perpetuation differ from that of page poetry, and how are the particular stakes of live poetry audible in this difference?

Were *Live Poetry* a study of live poetry *per se* or of the communities through which live poetry does flourish, it would necessarily pose such interesting questions. Instead, it is a critique of criticism, and so it repeatedly turns toward methods of *record writing* (e.g., using musical notation as a critical tool) and away

from the very liveness of the object it constitutes for study. In other terms, Novak seeks to facilitate the archivization of live poetry via written criticism, to produce a discourse (“critical language”) and a history (“historical documentation”) around live poetry, and in so doing save an art form not only from contemporary ignorance but also from the historical amnesia that—in the archivist’s terms—always threatens the lively spoken word.

Despite Novak’s appraisal of textual partisanship in poetry criticism, she doesn’t consider the textual bias in her own foray into the comprehensive critical categorization and recording of live poetry. Further, she occasionally transmutes criticism’s crisis of forgetfulness into a crisis of live poetry *per se*: “scholarly engagement with live poetry touches upon an important question concerning poetry in general: that of the future development, and survival, of the genre in contemporary media cultures” (238). What happened to live poetry’s flourishing in spite of critical inattention? Julian Jordan’s review of *Live Poetry*, available on [www.WriteOutLoud.net](http://www.WriteOutLoud.net), suggests both the ease and the influence of such rhetorical slippage: “Anyone interested in the future of live poetry should read this book” (n.p).

That this line of Jordan’s review should be cited on [www.livepoetry.com](http://www.livepoetry.com) betrays Novak’s investment in the old archival promise that a comprehensive historical record guarantees futurity—or, conversely and more specifically, that those who don’t study the history of live poetry are doomed to stymie the form. I’m not convinced on this matter, however, for if “progress” (i.e., changes and developments) in live poetry were somehow impeded by the lack of *written* histories

of taste, then there would have yet occurred no “history” to record: the dark times before Novak’s intervention would be what archives construct as chaotic prehistory. I have much more faith in Novak’s earlier suggestion that live words, and the communities constructed through them, are doing just fine on their own. Here’s my counterproposal: those interested in the past, present, or future of live poetry should get involved in live poetry communities. Reading *Live Poetry* (and then, presumably, getting involved in a community of critics) might not *hurt* live poetry as an art form, but these are two different enterprises.

### A discursive problem

Even if we set aside the ugly historio-critical assumption that academic research is inherently beneficial to its objects, we can find a related problem in Novak’s attempts to delineate a more-or-less objective methodology for critiquing live poetry. The live poems she selects for sample analysis demonstrate a strong tendency toward anti-hegemonic politics and ethics. Indeed, much self-consciously “live” or “performed” poetry is activist, and we might say that all live poetry—Novak defines it as staging a “direct encounter of the poet with a live audience” (12)—proposes an ethos of intersubjectivity against the logic of objectivity that structures systematic knowledge. Yet Novak evades any declaration of hermeneutic politics or ethics, presumably in order to posit her “toolkit” as just such an objective and systematic (i.e., rigorous) methodology. Thus, the academic strength of Novak’s methodology—drawing into discursive legibility and articulability

so many intuitively understood aspects of face-to-face communication (e.g., tone and emphasis, accent, bodily gestures, performative environs)—is also the condition of its political and ethical self-blinding. That is, Novak’s “critical language” is developed not out of the stakes of live poetry but in spite of them, not out of the counter-cultural (perhaps even subaltern) intersubjectivity of live poetic encounters but within the abstractions of academic interdisciplinarity.

This approach resembles the development of certain “branches” of postcolonial criticism within the disciplines of comparative literature or Marxism—as opposed to those “branches” of postcolonial criticism developed out of the cultural and material stakes of local colonial situations, such as subaltern studies or Indigenous theory. We might attempt to rescue postcolonial comp-lit and postcolonial Marxism from their Eurocentric pedigrees by recalibrating them toward local specificities, but such rescue efforts tend to lose the plot, being labour done in service of critical discourse (e.g., saving the art of Marxism from ignorance) rather than in service of that discourse’s putative object (e.g., communities economically disenfranchised through colonial practices). Novak’s methodology, similarly centred on a correction of critical discourse, seems as likely to do justice to the specific and varied concerns of live poets as to stumble upon those concerns ineptly or, indeed, to miss them entirely.

This is all to say that Novak approaches live poetry as a critic, for criticism, while dressed as a champion of live poetry. As a consequence, her study demonstrates little

reflection on the political and ethical stakes of live poetry criticism, on the *importance* of studying live poetry. (I should say, here, that David Kennedy’s review, “How To Write About Readings,” raises a related point.) Rather, Novak sticks to the terms set out by the pseudo-apolitical, pseudo-anethical “aesthetic” debates surrounding live poetry’s legitimacy as art: citing such dead-end debates, she finds in favour of those who defend live poetry on the aesthetic level. This hobbles her conclusions such that most sections and subsections of *Live Poetry* are capped by the same refrain: that live poetry is modally different from page poetry. These differences certainly matter to those already studying live poetry—those likely already convinced of the substance of these differences—but by abstracting such differences from their political and ethical stakes, Novak isn’t winning over any politically and ethically committed scholars to a new interdisciplinary field.

Novak’s methodological objectivity is, perhaps, simply an artefact of *Live Poetry*’s composition as her Ph.D. dissertation. This seems to be confirmed by her study’s polemical potshots at literary criticism, demonstrating a sort of deference to the academic ideal of the field-founding, combative first book. Novak consistently finds literary critical techniques wholly inadaptable to live poetry while investing much of the study productively modifying techniques of analysis and notation drawn from other disciplines. Yet all this overzealousness is undercut by a (too brief, too late) qualification appended to her “Checklist for the Analysis of Live Poetry Performances”: “the checklist ... does not cover those aspects

of poetry that traditionally have been dealt with in literary studies, such as theme, imagery, or rhetorical tropes. These may, of course, be of interest to the researcher ...” (233). Novak’s penultimate chapter, dedicated to a “sample analysis” of a live poetry performance, is similarly unconvincing regarding the limitation of “traditional” literary criticism: it occasionally cites a published version of the poem rather than the declared live version; it offers little interpretation unavailable to “traditional” approaches; and it offers some unpersuasive interpretation that might have benefited from closer attention to image and trope.

*Live Poetry* would be a far more generous and generative book if Novak took a political or ethical position, enabling her to assert why live poetry matters, and thus why its differences from page poetry matter, and thus why competent criticism of live poetry matters. Would such stakes demand a critical approach that shelves “traditional” literary interpretation in favour of the techniques Novak proposes? Would they demand a core competency with “traditional” literary interpretation, to which Novak’s techniques would provide ad hoc supplementation? Would they suggest that critical discourse is a violence and intuition a more ethical manner of interpretation? I suspect the stakes of live poetry vary enough to demand or suggest all three interpretive approaches, so Novak’s emphatic, preemptory shelving of literary critical methods seems both an over-correction for textual partisanship and a meta-critical distraction from the political and ethical interests of live poets and live poetry communities.

### One last good thing

Several of *Live Poetry*’s extant reviews are written by live poetry practitioners, and none of them suggests that Novak is writing for the wrong crowd. I mean this in two senses. First, as I suggested above, her study doesn’t do the cultural critical work necessary to win new academics to the study of live poetry. In this sense, Novak is preaching to the choir, to those already invested in live poetry communities. Suffice it to say that interdisciplinarity isn’t particularly useful unless it fosters coalition-building. Second, where *Live Poetry* shines is in its thorough parsing of the tangle of media that is poetry performance. If we take this thoroughness as productive rather than exhaustive—that is, if we divorce it from the archival anxiety underwriting *Live Poetry*—it offers an excellent resource for the practice of live poetry rather than its critique. I mention above Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing* which, while written as prescription for page poets, is much more valuable for its provision of a critical discourse and history surrounding digital textual dissemination and (un)creative copying. I think of *Live Poetry* in the inverse, written as critical description but much more valuable as a reminder, to page poets and live poets alike, of the complexities of their media. In this second sense—at the risk of contradicting my scepticism regarding this study’s importance to “the future of live poetry”—the readers who may benefit most from *Live Poetry* are poets.

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