**(Re-)Locating Prestige: Poetry Readings, Poetry Slams and Poetry Jam sessions in Contemporary Spain.**

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**Abstracts:**

Spanish contemporary poetry is enjoying extraordinary vitality. One of its more noteworthy manifestations is witnessed in poetry recitals, poetry slams and jam poetry sessions. These events –performed in alternative venues outside official or prestigious literary circles such as cafés, bars or clubs–, take place without any form of support from official cultural institutions but manage to attract a high number of poets and audience members. Their great popularity signals a key feature in Spanish literary circles: a new and non-traditional generation of literary consumers -and producers- has emerged. This article analyses said cultural shift: the new spaces poetry has infiltrated, and scholars’ reluctance to adapt their concept of poetry to meet these recent developments. Performance poetry generates a great traffic of ideas and cultural exchanges, and this article explores its cultural value and calls for a redistribution and relocation of prestige within new economies of aesthetic value that can legitimise this poetry as a worthy form of cultural production.

La poesía española contemporánea goza de gran vitalidad. Una de sus manifestaciones más importantes puede apreciarse en los recitales poéticos, los *slams* y las *poetry jam sessions* que se están llevando a cabo. Estos eventos, los cuales tienen lugar en locales alternativos como bares, cafés o discotecas y totalmente desvinculados de círculos literarios de prestigio, no cuentan con el apoyo de ninguna institución cultural oficial. No obstante, dichas actividades atraen a un gran número de público. Su éxito señala un rasgo esencial dentro del campo literario español: una nueva generación de consumidores –y productores– de literatura ha nacido. El presente artículo analiza este cambio cultural, los nuevos espacios que la poesía está invadiendo y la reticencia de los académicos hacia nuevas formas de poesía que no encajan con su definición y parámetros tradicionales. La perfopoesía genera gran movimiento de ideas e intercambios culturales, y el artículo explora su valor cultural y reivindica una relocalización de la idea de prestigio que legitime esta poesía como un producto cultural de valor.

**Key Words:** performance poetry, poetry slams, jam poetry sessions, prestige, Spanish poetry.

Perfopoesía, slams poéticos, jam poetry sessions, prestigio, poesía española.

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Spanish contemporary poetry, in both written and spoken form, is currently enjoying extraordinary vitality. The large number of poetry books, periodicals, magazines and online sources on the genre, the innovative reworkings of poetic traditions in aural practice, and of course an enthusiastic public that enjoys this widely available literature in all its forms, denote a pinnacle moment for Spanish poetry.[[1]](#footnote-1) Its dissemination is also wide reaching, prompting Díez de Revenga to state at the turn of the new millennium that

[l]a difusión de la literatura en la España contemporánea ha contado con los más diversos espacios ‘públicos’ que, con la finalidad primera de difundir la creación literaria, han ido más allá de la revista, el periódico o, incluso, del medio de difusión primario de la literatura que es el libro (1999: 455).

Since then, the ways in which poetry has been disseminated and promoted have become even more widespread. Within this context, poets are very active, leading *tertulias*, engaging with poetry readings and performances in literary and non-literary circles, and endorsing verse on the internet, with the result that the genre is now more open and available to the general public than ever before. At the moment, poetry has a very strong presence in cafés, bars and even clubs, significantly surpassing its more traditional settings and locations.

 One of the most noteworthy manifestations of poetry in Spain at present, both in terms of the popularity and the vitality they enjoy, is witnessed in live poetry recitals and performances. Poetry recitals have always enjoyed esteem in the Iberian Peninsula (Amorós and Díez Borque, 1999: 405-483) and Chris Perriam already stated that, at the end of the twentieth century, there seemed to be ‘an audience avid if not for poetry to read in print then certainly for poetry read out in performance and recital’ (1999: 198). According to this academic, ‘Spain is especially rich in the fleeting or uncaptured sociocultural moment’ (2010: 291), and the manifestation of poetry in live events is a perfect example of this; one that deserves full academic and critical consideration. This article, therefore, will focus on poetry recitals, poetry slams and jam poetry sessions, all of which can be loosely defined as live ‘performance poetry’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Due to the limited scope of the article, the analysis will only look at poetry events taking place in Madrid, where performance poetry has gathered a great following in the past few years. Furthermore, the article will focus on ‘alternative’ sites of performance in the Spanish capital, which remain outside the official or recognised prestigious circles.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 With regards to the genealogy of performance poetry, no general consensus has yet been reached: whilst some scholars consider it a continuation or rewriting of past oral traditions (Boudreau, 2009: 3), others see it as ‘a radical alternative to poetry as endorsed by academic theory’ (Casas & Gräbner, 2011: 12). Although definitions vary according to which type of performance poetry is being analysed, it is the relationship between this cultural activity and the social and temporal context that surrounds it that adds intricacy to its nature. Live poetry performances can be highly complex cultural productions, as they are not ‘a tangible object that can be studied independently of the spatio-temporal frame of its occurrence in any meaningful way’ (Novak, 2012: 361). And, maybe even more significantly,

A live poetry performance […] is marked by the simultaneity and collectivity of its production and reception. It depends on the common effort of poet and audience to make it happen in the here and now, and on the direct influence they have on each other by way of their physical presence. Audience members may be provoked to smile, sigh, or clap enthusiastically, by the poet as well as by each other. They may in turn provoke a poet to alter the tempo of his/her delivery. They may prompt him/her to change the order of his/her pieces, or to skip a line. They may drown out parts of a poem in loud laughter and request that other poems be repeated (Novak, 2012: 361).

Thus, the role of the audience –who is capable, to some extent, of influencing the themes this poetry will approach (particularly in poetry slams and jam sessions), of valuing it and deciding its success or failure, and of altering and changing a performance amongst other aspects– is key for such cultural production as well as for the perception and public opinion it enjoys. Poetry recitals or poetry readings are arguably the most well known form of performance poetry, although poetry slams and jam poetry sessions are the events that seem to capture public interest and attract the highest audience numbers in Spain and around the Western World at present. The origins of poetry jam sessions are found in jazz jam sessions, particularly prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s in the United States, when musicians would gather to play together spontaneously. When applied to poetry, it becomes an informal performance open to anyone who wants to take part –which inevitably has an impact on the quality of the poetry read– and in which participants are usually allowed to read a maximum of three poems. A poetry slam, conversely, is a ranked competition open and democratic in nature, welcoming anyone who wishes to sign up, during which poets read their work (Somers-Willett, 2009: 16-38). In poetry slams there is a time limit of three minutes –and ten seconds of grace– per performance, and poets are typically restricted in how they perform: no props or costumes are allowed and music, except for that which poets can create with their own body, is also usually excluded. The scores are normally awarded by five volunteer judges selected from the audience –although this can vary from place to place– and participants are eliminated in rounds, with a final winner that receives prizes such as DVDs, t-shirts or books. Poetry slams first appeared in Chicago in the 1980s, at the hands of Marc Smith. The original venue was the *Get Me High Lounge*, until the event moved to the *Green Mill Jazz Club*. Since then, however, slams have spread all over the world, as has their popularity. At present there are several national and world poetry slam championships, and most of them are regulated by ‘Poetry Slam, Inc.’, an official non-profit organisation that oversees the international coalition of poetry slams. The creation of ‘Poetry Slam, Inc.’ in 1997 –although its origins and presence can be traced back a few more years– effectively proved the success and popularity of this poetry. *Slam* (1997) and *Slamnation* (1998), a film and a documentary respectively that were directed by Marc Levin, also elevated the profile of poetry slams, although it was probably HBO *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* (premiered in 2002) that raised its visibility the most in the English speaking world: ‘slam has become arguably the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’ (Gregory, 2008: 63), contributing to what some scholars have described as a ‘live poetry boom’ (Novak, 2012: 358).

All these events, be them poetry readings, poetry slams or jam poetry sessions, can of course feature a broad range of voices, styles, cultural traditions and approaches to writing and performance.[[4]](#footnote-4) As already mentioned, poetry performance enjoys great popularity and success in Spain at the moment –particularly in big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, but also in other urban spaces such as Granada, Jaén or Girona– and it has done so for the past four or five years. These events, which are almost always performed in alternative venues outside official or prestigious literary circles, usually take place without any form of support from official cultural institutions –such as the *Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte*, whose *Secretaría de Estado de Cultura* regularly offers subventions and grants to develop projects and cultural events– but they counterbalance this by attracting high numbers of poets and audience members who actively engage and participate in these activities until the early hours of the morning. In Madrid, bars such as *Club Bukowski*, *Libertad 8* and *Los Diablos Azules*, and to a lesser extent places such as *Tapas y Fotos* or *Natcha Club*, are particularly well known for these popular and well-attended regular sessions.

**Poetry Recitals**

From very traditional poetry readings to *tertulias* followed by recitals with music and choreography –such as those by the literary group *Otras Palabras*[[5]](#footnote-5)*–*, or more technically advanced multimedia events, audiences in Madrid and around Spain have become spoilt for choice with regards to poetry recitals. Poetry recitals, however, are nothing new: what affords originality to current performances is the audience’s participation as well as the fact that visual arts and visual culture now seem to permeate most of the recitals to the extent of pushing boundaries between genres.[[6]](#footnote-6) A traditional poetry recital is described by Zitomer as

a reading sponsored by a well-funded institution, held in a sophisticated cultural venue and featuring a recognized poet, [that] relies on and reifies ‘poetry’ as a cultural object, strictly regulated through a self-enclosed system of surveillance and isolated from a broader public […]. A person with institutional credentials introduces the poet […]. The poet, from offstage or the front row and amidst applause, approaches the podium, on or beside which a beverage has been placed. While reading […] there is little sound other than a few ‘ohs’ and ‘ums,’ measured laughter at appropriate moments, and perhaps even a bit of awkward and contained clapping […]. When the credentialed host signals the end […], there is more applause, after which the audience members leave as discreetly as they came, after purchasing books and obtaining autographs’ (2007: 48, 51-52).

Poetry recitals in alternative venues greatly differ from the definition above. In alternative recitals, the role of a credentialed host does not exist: at most, the venue owner or organiser will utter a few words before asking the poet to take to an improvised stage; and there is no financial support for the event –at least not usually. Furthermore, alternative poetry recitals take place in non-literary spaces that are willing to welcome a different sort of activity to their midst: ‘[m]ost avant-garde poetry readings take place in borrowed spaces –pubs, bars, lecture rooms, art galleries, halls, and theaters where the readers stumble over stage sets, talk above the noise of drinkers returning from the bar, or try to figure out how best to use a PA system installed for other purposes’ (Middleton, 1998: 270). In such venues, particularly in cafés and bars as is the case in Spain at the moment, the background noise is a reminder that readers and audience are inhabiting a borrowed location, but such relaxed atmosphere certainly works to its advantage. The audience is not quiet nor is it there merely to enjoy the recital in most cases either: this is an unstructured crowd that might be there to socialise and encounters a poetry event by chance, a group of friends supporting a particular poet, or a spectator that views poetry as a plus to a night out. Of course, this audience –who is allowed to ‘socialize before, after and even during the event’ (Zitomer, 2007: 54)– will not remain indifferent to the performance, and a boisterous reaction can be expected. The role of the audience in poetry recitals can be considered less decisive than in poetry slams and jam sessions –since audience members do not have to openly assess and evaluate the performances– but it is still key in order to forge a relationship with the poet, marking the activity as worthy of consideration, and deem it a success. What seems to set traditional and contemporary alternative recitals apart is the lack of strict regulations and adherence to a hierarchal process in the latter, which allows for a freer and more democratic activity where literature invades new spaces and finds new avenues of consumption. As I will examine more closely in the second half of my analysis, the site and audience both work to transform this cultural production into something public that welcomes everyone’s attention –rather than only a certain elite’s–, and contribute to a shift in cultural paradigms and a relocation of literary prestige or appreciation.

At present, performed poems usually include ‘theatrical, visual, sonic, and spatial interventions’ (Casas & Gräbner, 2011: 10), drawing on the so-called ‘multimedia’ art where poetic word, music and image come together in a seamless and powerful form of expression, each single element complementing the entire performance and engaging the audience’s sensitivity in full. New technologies allow poets to engage with this practice in very innovative ways, and multimedia poetry –arguably the most popular genre of poetry recitals at present in Spain– finds in this its perfect tools. An example of multimedia poetry can be found in Óscar Martín Centeno’s performances,[[7]](#footnote-7) who is one of the most well-known multimedia poets in Madrid and in the Spanish poetic circuits at the moment. Martín Centeno’s poetry performances have taken place in theatres, university halls and lecture rooms, cafés and even night clubs. Following the author’s understanding of multimedia poetry, in Martín Centeno’s sophisticated recitals (widely available on the internet for users to peruse at their own leisure) each of the elements that make up the performance are completely necessary and tailor-made for the specific text, giving it a new overall meaning. The performances, thus, become complex art forms that explore the boundaries between genre, cultural production and reception, as each member of the audience may engage differently with them and its stimuli:

Las vídeoproyecciones con música sincronizada han demostrado ser una magnífica forma de acercar a la gente a la literatura, permitiéndonos además presentar una obra unitaria donde lo visual y lo sonoro acompañan a los poemas, enriqueciéndolos con sugerencias artísticas para crear una obra que trata de impregnar todos los sentidos. Las diversas expresiones artísticas no son un adorno, sino una forma de aumentar los elementos significantes de los versos, para conseguir que de esa forma llegue mejor a los espectadores. La idea no es sólo presentar juntas diferentes expresiones artísticas, sino realizar una mezcla efectiva donde cada elemento refuerce y amplifique a los demás.

(in [www.grupoartistico8.com/Grupo\_Art%C3%ADstico\_8/%C3%93scar](http://www.grupoartistico8.com/Grupo_Art%C3%ADstico_8/%C3%93scar)\_

Mart%C3%ADn\_Centeno.html)

New technologies have been employed in this context for quite some time, but the new spaces these recitals have been navigating and conquering in the past four or five years –and the way in which a faithful audience follows them– offer new avenues for poetry and its circulation. In the last few years, the spaces in which the performances take place have become key, as they hold crucial social and literary implications. Venues that have never been associated with literary events and circles in the past now open their doors to poetry recitals: for instance the nightclub *Teatro Kapital* in the centre of Madrid, often holds poetry book launches and recitals, including that of Óscar Martín Centeno. In such alternative poetry recitals, very far from what is understood as a conventional poetry reading, Óscar Martín Centeno combines the reading of his poems with flashing images on wide screens accompanied by music, all composed by the poet himself for the specific purpose of the recital. The images, which usually echo part of the poem or highlight key words in it, draw in the audience and appeal to all their senses, attracting them in different ways towards the poetic production. Such an aspect is key when considering visual arts and the prevalence of visual culture in the new millennium –in television, cinema or the plastic arts–, which has had an expected and significant effect on poetry. Visual poetry has been noteworthy in Spain as an aesthetic since the 1960s (for examples of visual poety see VV.AA., 2007), but the visual element in the new millennium is not restricted only to its form. During performances, readers and audiences can easily observe the effects of visual culture in poems that exude an exceptional sensitivity to the images created through words in the composition and a tendency towards all things visual. This is particularly obvious in performances, but also very noticeable on the page. Such performances –the spaces in which they take place, and the audiences that engage with them– open up interesting questions such as: what do these new forms of live performance activity imply about the poetry itself? What is the role of a social public or audience in literary or cultural creation? And how can, or should, reception be measured and analysed in such contexts? More significantly, these events force us to reflect about the impact and reach of this literary activity, and they compel –or should compel– critics to approach it. They certainly move literature from a limited literary space to a very public one, allowing poetry to become a kind of public affair at the forefront of literary production.

**Poetry Slams and Jam Poetry Sessions**

In poetry slams and jam poetry sessions new technologies do not play such an important role. In fact, they are usually completely absent –and banned–, and participants who read out their poems in these events usually bring only their notebooks and pads to read from, or occasionally read from mobile phone screens. Poetry slams and jam sessions actually attract higher rates of attendance than poetry recitals do, and this might well be due to the greater level of interaction and participation that is required of the public in these events. In the Anglophone world, poetry slams and poetry jam sessions have been popularised by TV programmes, films, documentaries and the general institutionalisation of this poetry (Rivera 2013: 117). Without any doubt, they currently feature –particularly amongst young audiences[[8]](#footnote-8)– as the fastest growing area of performance poetry (Gregory, 2008: 64). This, however, greatly differs from the poetic slam and jam session scene in Spain: despite the creation of ‘Poetry Slam España’,[[9]](#footnote-9) in the Iberian Peninsula these events are far less institutionalised and structured and can be considered an underground movement. Equally, slams and poetry jam sessions do not seem to be predominantly a youth movement in Spain, but rather one that involves a wide age range.

Poetry slams and poetry jam sessions in Madrid have become key weekly and twice-weekly performances in bars such as *Club Bukowski*, *Libertad 8* and *Los Diablos Azules*, with programmes that formally establish set dates and times for these events. The ‘Se buscan poetas’ jam poetry session series at the *Los Diablos Azules* –which takes place on Tuesdays–, enjoys great popularity and for sometime it was even broadcasted live over the internet. These sessions sometimes host a featured poet, alongside whom everyone else can read their work. Besides the live feed, the series is widely promoted online, on blogs and social media, demonstrating that there is also an alternative network that backs such cultural production outside the traditional and official circles. The ‘Micro Abierto’ sessions at *Libertad 8* and the *Club Bukowski*’s ‘Jam Poetry Sessions’ are equally regular and popular, and the public can be seen attending both events in the same night as they are held at different times precisely to allow such shifts between locations. It is important to highlight here that these performances take place in small spaces, most of them bars, which afford an intimate atmosphere between the public and the audience. Such characteristics underline this cultural activity as a highly social art (Boudreau, 2009: 3), and they actively encourage a different dynamic between poet and audience. These events ‘must utilize (or have the advantage of utilizing) spaces not constructed for cultural displays […]. The setting is thus often cluttered with activities external to the “reading” in its most literal and limited sense –though it is more appropriate to understand such disruptions as part of the event’s composition ’ (Zitomer, 2007: 53). In Spain, contrary to the norm in the Anglophone world, the location of poetry slams and poetry jam sessions is not only determined by the social nature of this performance: it also responds to the lack of financial support that makes this an underground movement closely linked, at the moment, to the economic crisis that has assailed Spain very severely since 2008.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although the economic instability cannot be the sole culprit, it definitely plays a role in recent developments: the shortage of financial support for cultural activities has forced a great number of events to migrate to non-traditional venues that they would not logically occupy, but in which they thrive thanks to the current consumer-based culture. And the economic crisis does not only impact on the location of this poetry, it also has an effect on the topics such poetry discusses –an aspect that will be approached later in this article.

 The use of these spaces has a very positive effect on the audience, as the social ambience that permeates the performance inevitably stimulates an exchange between poets and public. The audience in such performances, just as in poetry recitals, is a dual one: one that may attend the events for their literary value, and another that may encounter and acknowledge poetry as part of a wider social event. In this sense, the audience also becomes a double consumer, of both the poetry and the other goods being sold in a café or bar. The public, a general one that may lack literary training of any kind, becomes here –particularly in poetry slams– the judge or critic that decides whether a performance is worthy or not, expressing an opinion as valid and influential as that of academics’ (O'keefe Aptowicz, 2009: 382). In addition, in closed social spaces the audience needs to be –and remain– very active: ‘not only is the audience present, it can also respond to a performance in various noticeable ways and thereby impact directly on the quality of, and the creation of meaning in, the performance. A live poetry performance, in this sense, is the result of the communication between performer and audience’ (Novak, 2012: 373). Thus, the audience can be understood ‘as participants in, rather than recipients of, a performance’ (359), enriching the activity further and embodying ‘the idea that art belongs to people and not institutions or fashion-makers’ (Woods, 2008: 19). Similar to the unprofessional or untrained audience that judges such poetry, it is crucial to acknowledge that the poet can also be someone equally lacking in literary training and may simply be drawn in by the fervour of the activity, which may well have an impact on the overall literary quality of the performances. In this milieu, and fully realising the social potential of this performed poetry (Rivera, 2013: 115), any member of the audience can also become a performer –‘each member of the audience has the option of taking the stage, and each poet is variously a member of the audience and the one speaking before it’ (Zitomer, 2007: 54)–, thus emphasising the connection and dependency between audience and poets.[[11]](#footnote-11) Even though an absence of literary training is not necessarily the norm, such characteristic is precisely what allows this poetry to flourish: the exchange is realised at an equal level between author and audience and hierarchy dies out.

Since these performances enact an engagement between people and their social context (Zitomer, 2007: 48), it calls for themes that relate to their interests, concerns and issues: ‘slam seeks to integrate everyday life and art, slam themes and “plots” deal with everyday issues —family, coming-of-age, and sociopolitical events. [They] carry an urban vibe, portray a grittier view of life, are counter-mainstream, convey culture, and sport an activist position’ (Boudreau, 2009: 6). This rings particularly true in the Spanish circuit of the moment, where many of the poetry performances deal with the current economic crisis and public dissatisfaction with the government. The poetic publications on the crisis so far (see, for instance, Aparicio, 2012, VV.AA., 2011a, 2011b) support the idea of a strong connection between cultural activities such as these and the economic crisis. These sessions, therefore, conform to an essential social function: ‘[t]he spoken-word venue becomes a forum in which participants assert and defend the legitimacy of their social and political views, and the audience is a critical component in the exchange of ideas; their responses to the messages they see and hear help to spark and sustain dialogue’ (Ingalls, 2012: 101). Such an open forum allows poetic activity to surpass its traditional sphere of private personal readings and elitist recitals to reach a very public space. But more importantly, the exceptionally social nature of this poetry endorses a strong civic engagement and a public discourse where the value of poetry far surpasses which is centred purely on its literary value.

**Shifting Cultural Paradigms and the (re)Location of Prestige**

The great popularity and success that poetry recitals, poetry slams and jam poetry sessions have been enjoying in Spain during the last five years signal a crucial shift in Spanish literary circles of the moment: a new and non-traditional generation of literary consumers –and producers– has emerged. In public spaces where poetry meets an undoubtedly thriving social life, a shift in cultural paradigms becomes obvious; these new consumers seem to query traditional literary ideals and hold what could be deemed non-traditional aesthetic values –in the sense that what they regard of literary value might significantly differ from the canon that critics and academics would ideally encourage and establish. The new spaces poetry has infiltrated demand a stronger interaction with the public, a trait that can be considered as somewhat unexpected since such a public might not be traditional poetry readers in the strict sense and may very well be at the venue for purposes other than just enjoying performance poetry. Such poetic activity in a group not conventionally recognised as critics or as creators of prime literary products (Damon, 1998: 332), granting them the capacity to produce and judge a cultural product, democratises poetry to a great extent. Due to the fact that these events have no official or institutional backing, participants are not expected to be established or prestigious poets, and the lack of pressure to obey certain rules makes room for a desire to simply enjoy poetry performance and creation. Only the pleasure of sharing poetry is valid in this space, and there is no need to adhere to specific aesthetics, tradition, canon or the establishment. Certainly, one of the great values of these activities is the osmosis that people can enjoy there, and the interchange of fruitful ideas that are constantly in transit. Marginalisation does not exist in this milieu, and a generally casual and festive atmosphere that helps further significant cultural exchanges reigns. This has almost become a social phenomenon in Madrid, where the general public has taken the reins of a previously elitist genre and appropriated it to approach it in its own way. This not only democratises poetry, it also forges new horizons for the genre and implies a change in the authors: there is no driving need to publish within performance poetry. Traditionally, poets would write and publish –and then maybe perform in order to promote sales or spread their work more widely–, whereas in the last few years a new generation of poets, interested in sharing and communicating their poetry live without having to necessarily publish their work, has emerged. One cannot ignore the fact that poetry recitals, poetry slams and jam poetry session, whilst conquering new spaces which poetry had not inhabited before, might also be forging new poets and followers, fashioning them out of people that fall in love with the genre after listening to it or seeing it being performed. Such a feature not only promotes poetry amongst a wider public –raising its profile and rendering the genre more alive than it has ever been in recent memory–, it also forces critics and academics to defer to popular opinion and approach a product that they would habitually disregard due to lack of proper literary authority and credentials.

 At the moment, at least within the Spanish literary circles, there seems to be little dialogue between official spaces or events and alternative practices[[12]](#footnote-12). Their individual existences could almost be classed as endogamic relationships, and very few poets seem to be able –or willing– to cross the lines that divide them. At any rate, the official and prestigious literary circles appear to be the marginal ones at present, attracting low audience numbers despite their official support and recognition. With regards to critical attention, there has not been much academic research into the new recitals and poetic performances yet: ‘[w]hile the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry performance has been negligible, despite the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century’ (Bernstein, 1998: 3). This might be due to the irregular literary quality such events might present, the nature of the performances and the inherent ‘dificultad de hacer permantente este tipo de actividades’ (Díez De Revenga, 1999: 455), although it is obvious that more needs to be done. The few works in the Anglophone world that look at performance poetry seem to focus on slams only, forging a fractured and incomplete picture of the phenomenon. In Spain, unfortunately, the critical attention live poetry performances have received so far seems to be nil. Poetry slams and jam sessions have not been seriously reviewed by any major poetry critic (G. Franssen, in Casas & Gräbner, 2011: 31, Gregory, 2008: 63), except for Harold Bloom, who very vehemently proclaimed the depravity of poetry slams:

it's all gone to hell. 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 nonsense at each other. […] This isn't even silly; it is the death of art (Barber, 2000: 379).

This controversial statement created outrage within performance poetry, but it was exceptionally successful in attracting some measure of academic attention to the topic. Bloom’s lashing declaration also helped to draw more general awareness to poetry performance and what it can offer: ‘performance of poetry as a practice and “performance poetry” as a genre highlight the significance of the cultural for the social and the political, and it provides artists with a powerful mode of critiquing and challenging mainstream cultures’ (Casas & Gräbner, 2011: 18). These events fulfill a crucial role in Spanish society: they function as a great tool for civic engagement, and they manage to capture the moment and very strongly give voice to current social concerns. Also, such performances help to keep the genre very much alive in the new millennium.

 An unavoidable feature of this new performance poetry is that its literary quality can be quite irregular. However, besides its literary value and quality, these events are extremely helpful in exploring new approaches to, and possibilities for, the poetic genre. Needless to say, there is an immanent filtering or selection process in place here as well: those poets that clearly stand out for their literary quality will be asked to perform in other venues and events –and they may even be approached by publishing houses[[13]](#footnote-13)–, whilst those that lack any literary value will quickly fade into oblivion after having completed their role of taking their poetry to the public. So whilst these events do not guarantee consistently high quality poetry, it is their function as a cultural meeting point that keeps poetry alive, and the interchange of ideas and approaches to literature that they generate, that deems them crucial. They are, according to Boudreau, ‘an engagement scaffold to poetry’ (2009: 4), and defining performance poetry as ‘distinct from the mainstream poetry world, enables it to be packaged and branded as a marketable product, removed from the stigma which is perceived to plague public perceptions of poetry.’ (Gregory, 2008: 69). For this reason, performance poetry clearly signifies an important cultural activity and a substantial challenge to mainstream cultures, however random or outside ‘the traditional “circuit of culture”’ (Perriam, 2010: 293) it might seem. The extreme popularity that poetry readings and poetry performances have gained in recent times cannot be ignored, forcing us to reconsider where the limit between humble –or middlebrow culture, as we could consider these events– and prestigious or highbrow culture really resides. These practices generate significant cultural exchanges, far surpassing their unassuming nature, which should force critics to reconsider their real cultural value as well as what is understood by ‘prestige’ and its location within the literary context.

Prestige is certainly a thorny aspect within literary studies, especially when linked to issues of quality. The fact that classifications according to quality in many instances lack clear explanations, criteria and parameters (Verboord, 2003: 259) does not help the matter either. Pierre Bourdieu approached the notion of literary prestige in his works, and he focused on three factors on which it was dependent: position, disposition and position-taking. Whilst position refers to the position an author holds in the literary field, disposition alludes to their specific individual characteristics and position-taking to the choices they make in their literary practices (Bourdieu, 1983, 1996: 231). Such factors, particularly the disposition and the position-taking of an author –which might allude to the authors’ individual characteristics such as age, gender and education, or their political affiliations and artistic choices– should definitely encourage critics to look at performance poetry as a practice worthy of prestige.Other academics have endeavoured to build on and develop the notion of prestige, and Verboord’s attempt to distinguish quality from prestige is a very useful one for the present article, although many of the indicators of prestige he implements –literary prizes, academic studies, literary encyclopedias, prizes for popular literature, encyclopedias of popular literature and publishers (Verboord, 2003: 265)– are not valid parameters to measure performance poetry in Spain. For instance, there are no significant prizes in place for performed poetry in the Iberian Peninsula, nor is this activity linked to the established publishing world to the necessary extent. What is significant in Verboord’s attempt to differentiate quality and prestige is that the former implies the possibility of establishing the intrinsic literary value of texts, whilst the latter suggests that the classiﬁcation of authors in the literary ﬁeld is a socially determined process (262). According to the scholar, there is an inherent social aspect within such context:

Choices made in the selection and classiﬁcation of books are socially constructed. Though many critics would like us to believe in their abilities to classify authors with nothing more than the texts at hand, they perform their job in a social context. Not only do scholars listen carefully to other experts in the literary ﬁeld, since the sociocultural changes in the 1960s, they also have to take public opinion into consideration (Verboord, 2013: 261)

In Spain at least, and to a certain extent even in the Anglophone world, this interaction does not seem to be taking place, or not to the full extent. Even if the cultural market has become more consumer-based and the institutional bases of cultural authority have been somewhat weakened, this does not seem to be enough to steer academics and critics from more conventional forms of poetry to performance poetry. Performance poetry, it must be noted, does not appear to be overtly concerned about prestige or the economy of literary recognition, preferring to focus on the chance these events grant for poets to perform alongside other poets (Zitomer, 2007: 53). Conversely, performance poetry’s disregard for canonicity and institutionalisation becomes its motor and the element that keeps it alive and vital, adding to its transient and ephemeral nature. This poetry seems to focus its attention on, and belong to, exclusively the poets and the audience members who create and witness it, thus producing its own internal prestige that rejects the need for approval from the cultural and social elite. This, rather than being an advantage, can be considered a weakness, as it means performance poetry contributes to its own unassuming, alternative and submerged existence, leaving its prospect of becoming a prestigious cultural activity at the hands of fate and the public alone.

The changes in both consumers and producers clearly signal new economies of aesthetic value. Poetry recitals, poetry slams and jam poetry sessions attract large audiences –which led Woods to claim that ‘[p]oetry in general owes a lot to slam’ (2008: 19)–, and in a consumer-based cultural market public attention and taste must clearly be recognised as an unambiguous marker of prestige. Both disposition and position-taking provide a basis of prestige for these cultural practices –particularly relevant in terms of artistic choices and ideological affiliations–, but such indicators of prestige as are public appreciation and attention support the demand for consideration and recognition of prestige. If academia and critics in general have largely ignored this cultural product until now, ‘failing to update and adapt its concept of poetry to meet these recent developments’ (Novak, 2012: 360), it is now time this is rectified. Literary criticism as an institution, because of its specialisation and authority, has the greatest inﬂuence when granting prestige (Verboord, 2003: 264), and it is their duty to listen to society and gauge public opinion in contrast with, and against, their own. How this should be approached, however, is still an open debate: performance poetry needs to be studied and analysed in a way that does not change the dynamics of this kind of poetry and the social settings in which it is currently practised, and without bringing about a formal institutionalisation that would no doubt denature it completely. The current economic crisis –with its cuts or total lack of funding for cultural events– has helped to push poetry out of traditional literary circles and into social and more fluid spaces, but in doing so it has also given it a new lease of life. These new sites act as a good and apt metaphor for the relocation of prestige, as it seems to be moving physically, travelling with poets and audiences to new locations. It is obvious that performance poetry holds crucial importance to the practice of the poetry in this century, and it must demand a fair redistribution and location of prestige that legitimises this form of poetry as a worthy form of cultural production.

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1. Whenever this article mentions Spanish contemporary poetry, it makes reference to poetry written in Spanish in the Iberian Peninsula. Poetry manifestations in the other official languages of Spain can be equally vibrant, but given their particular cultural, linguistic and social contexts they unquestionably require and demand an article of their own. They will not, therefore, be studied here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Another highly popular form of live performance poetry in Spain, specific to the Basque Country, is *bertsolaritza*. This traditional art of improvising poetry in Basque is also a wide social phenomenon that fills stadiums to the rim. However, given the language in which this poetry is performed, *bertsolaritza* falls outside the remits of my article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prestigious or official circles refer to venues in the city such as the *Círculo de Bellas Artes de Madrid*, the *Ateneo de Madrid*, or even the *Instituto Cervantes* –which are all sites that enjoy official institutional backing and recognition as (prestigious) cultural spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The emergence of digital poetry is also worthy of consideration here, despite this not being the focus of the article. The recent and fast-paced development of online poetry does not allow a clear definition of it, mainly due to its many forms –it might be supported by videos, images, sounds, only text or animations– but also to its short history (Regueiro Salgado, 2011: 98, 111). Significantly, social media and the internet in general are proving vital for new poetry practices, and as some critics have stated that ‘aparecen numerosas propuestas que erigen internet en santuario de un mundo globalizado’ (Bagué Quílez 2008: 51), where interesting dialogues and a traffic of ideas have emerged (Cano Ballesta, 2007: 7). The number of online blogs dedicated to poetry has swiftly grown in recent years (García Rodríguez 2008), and this is key for both the wide accessibility of the genre and its promotion and development. See Romero López and Sanz Cabrerizo (2008), Sánchez-Mesa Martínez (2004) and Tortosa (2008) for comprehensive analyses of cyberliterature. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Apart from editing and publishing a creative writing magazine, the group holds monthly performances in *El Gato Verde* and in the *Café El Despertar* in the Spanish capital. For more information on the activities these group organises and carries out visit their website: http://[www.otraspalabras.es](http://www.otraspalabras.es) [last accessed on 4th September 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a detailed account of poetry recitals and performances in Spain from medieval times to the end of the twentieth century see Amorós and Díez Borque (1999: 405-483). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Óscar Martín Centeno’s poetry publications include *Espejos enfrentados* (2006); *Las cántigas del Diablo* (2007); *Sucio tango del alma* (2008); *Circe* (2011); and *Las cántigas & Je suis le Diable* (2012). This last book is linked to a website from which readers who purchase the paper copy of the work can access and download extra written and multimedia material. Martín Centeno has also written manuals and delivered papers on the topic of poetry within multimedia and new technologies, and has worked as a cultural promoter. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Poetry slams and jam poetry sessions are very attractive to young audiences. The youth views them as ‘a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick’ (Gregory, 2008: 63), able to provide an escape route to their concerns and voice their worries. Also, many critics in the Anglophone world have centred their attention on how poetry slams and poetry jam sessions can enhance education and literacy amongst young audiences and practitioners (Gregory, 2008, 2013, Ingalls, 2012, Novak, 2012, Rudd, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Poetry Slam España’ currently has 10 branches across Spain: Madrid, Barcelona, Mallorca, Granada, Jaén, Valencia, Vigo, L’Hospitalet, Arousa and Ciudad Real. They celebrated the third edition of the ‘National Poetry Slam España’ in Madrid on 21and 22 June 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Not much critical attention has been paid to the effects of the economic crisis on cultural activity (Metropolitano, 2011). Some poetry publications, on the contrary, have responded to it, proving what can arguably be seen as a fruitful relationship: *Esto no rima (Antología de la poesía indignada* (Aparicio, 2012); *Las voces del 15-M* (VV.AA., 2011a); *Poetas del 15M* (VV.AA., 2011b). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The figure of the poet also raises questions with regards to who is actually being performed in these events. This is an issue that the present article cannot address due to its limited scope, although anyone interested in this aspect of performance poetry should refer to Novak (2012) for an interesting approach to the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. There are, of course, exceptions to this, and some very well known poets such as Luis Alberto de Cuenca or Ana Rossetti can be seen performing in both official and alternative venues and events. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Some publishing houses have realised the value and potential of poetry performances. An example of this is *Agua: Símbolo y memoria* (Silva et al., 2006), an anthology that emerged from various performances carried out in *Libertad 8* and that brings together well-known poets and new authors. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)