Books of Hours and Writing the Landscape

Co-director of Liberated Words, Lucy English, (and a Reader in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University) is a well-known spoken word poet and novelist. It is really a pleasure to at last feature her own writing on the website. *The Book of Hours* https://thebookofhours.org/ is both a printed book of poems (Burning Eye Books), but also an online collaboration and a reimagining of a medieval Book of Hours in poetry film form. It contains a formidable 48 poetry films, created by 27 collaborators from three continents. The project was longlisted for the New Media Writing Prize in 2018.

This essay was originally titled 'Writing Poetry for Poetry Films', and it does illustrate this subject very well, but particularly in relation to Books of Hours. As such it also provides a way to reframe our thinking about the aesthetic choices poets and novelists make in relation to the environment and place. We learn how the historical Books of Hours reflected farming, growing food, seasonal occupations; how we have separated ourselves from this patterning, and how contemporary writers have turned back to find deep connection to ecology and landscape.

The Book of Hours

Lucy English

The Book of Hours is an online poetry film project which contains 48 poetry films made in collaboration with 27 filmmakers. Through the process of creation, I have explored how to bring the immediacy and vibrancy of spoken word into the poetry film form. My project is experimental in its use of spoken word in poetry film, and innovative in its approach to creating a themed collection of poetry films. This essay examines the structure of the medieval Books of Hours and how contemporary writers have developed this. I investigate some approaches to writing about landscape and I reflect on how audiences for spoken word poetry have changed.

The Structure of a Book of Hours and how contemporary writers have developed the concept

My background in poetry is through spoken word, and particularly through poetry slam, the energetic, competitive form of poetry begun by Marc Smith in Chicago in the 1980's (Smith, 2011). I started performing poetry in 1996 after I won The Bristol Poetry Slam, the first poetry slam I had ever entered. The Bristol slams in those days attracted audiences of over 200 people and were raucous, lively events. To stand out in a slam you had to be memorable. Most of my competitors were young, male and loud and the dominant style was comedy or social comment. The poetry was performed to have instant impact on the audience, with noise, and plenty of animated gestures. I entered the slam because I wanted to show that a woman could stand up and do a quieter type of poetry and retrospectively I can see why I won. I wrote three poems which were crowd-pleasing, and well-crafted. I didn't need to yell, or moan because I could tease and entertain with words. I didn't, and still don't, think that my style was 'better' than the energetic slam poets, but it was different.

In those early slam years, I continued to stand out. At that time, many people took up spoken word (or performance poetry as it was called then) because they wanted to express their feelings or political views and this expression was more important than the craft of writing. Spoken word performers came from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures and some emerged through recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, or were influenced by rap or comic performers. I had studied English Literature and had a good understanding of poetic techniques. My poetry is essentially lyrical. I want the quality of the words to stand out.

For example, in 'Take me To the City', a poem I performed many times in slams, there is plenty of description:

'… I walked to Tescos where the motorway meets the river
Above my head, one stream flowing on concrete pillars.
The other, beneath my feet,
black and weed logged like a sewer. (English, 2014, p. 17).

Since those heady days of slam the spoken word scene has developed considerably. It is not enough now to shout out loud to your audience. The quality and the subtlety of writing has increased and quieter more reflective voices inhabit the scene, such as, in North America Buddy Wakefield, Shane Koyczan, and Warsan Shire; and in the UK, Joelle Taylor, Raymond Antrobus and Hollie McNish. The poetry I write too is no longer constrained by the slam format. I do not have to keep to three minutes, or think about immediate impact, or choose a topic that will instantly appeal to my audience. My practice has now evolved in

several new directions: I co-write theatre-length shows which may contain stand-alone pieces, but also have multi-voiced poems. The poetry in *Flash,* which toured the UK in 2010–11, is reflective and charts my family's relationship to my Downs Syndrome sister (Carmichael, 2010). In *Count Me In* (2014–15), I created the character of Maureen, my polar opposite – shy and needy, a home bird who dreads the day she will no longer look after her granddaughter.

My main challenge in the writing of the poetry for *The Book of Hours* has been to find a contemplative form of spoken word that can be translated to poetry film. My usual way of writing poetry is to choose a narrative structure, to develop a story within the poem/s, and to use lyrical language to enhance meaning. I found early on in the project that any narrative structure had to be more condensed in a poetry film, or even abandoned. Detailed descriptions, explanations and dialogue, the bedrock of much of my previous spoken word poetry, proved to be too long and complicated. A poetry film does not need so many words since the images, and indeed the sound, also carry meaning; much of the text has to be sacrificed to the image. A current approach, when combining spoken word poetry with film, is to create a film of the poet reading or performing the poem (Apples and Snakes, 2019). Spoken word films, like music videos, tend to rely on the physical presence of the performer.

The UK bank Nationwide recently commissioned spoken word poets in an advertising campaign, *Voice of the People.* Here, spoken word poets perform poems based on situations where they have needed financial support, and the poet sits or stands and addresses the camera (Nationwide, 2016). This is a notable example of the accessibility of spoken word poetry as Nationwide chose spoken word, rather than page poets, to feature in this campaign. The *Voice of the People* poems, although much shorter than the artists' usual spoken word pieces, are personal and confessional. For my project, I felt that such an approach was limiting. *The Book of Hours* isn't confessional. It isn't about 'me'; it is designed to convey mood, or a reflection on place. I examined the original Books of Hours to discover what they offered their readers, and how I could translate this into the writing of the poetry. I then explored how more contemporary writers had developed or evolved the Books of Hours format.

A medieval Book of Hours was a collection of religious readings and accompanying images (Fay-Sallois, 2005). By the fourteenth century these had become highly decorative works of art and many were produced by craftsmen for wealthy patrons. They were created so that those outside of the religious orders could follow the patterns and rituals of monastic life. The book began with a calendar illustrated by images of activities connected to each month, such as sowing crops, harvest and feasting. The subsequent texts were divided into sections and one of these sections was the 'Hours', a series of prayers and readings spanning a complete day and night and changing with the religious season. This

reflected the Hours of the Divine Office a code of religious behaviour adopted by St. Benedict in his sixth-century guide to monastic life. Each 'hour' was roughly three hours apart, and was the time for prayer and reflection. The first was Vigil, at midnight, followed by Lauds, then Prime, first thing in the morning, then Terce, then Sext at approximately lunchtime. After this was None followed by Vespers and finally Compline, after which the monks went to bed. The 'Hours' were therefore a template for religious devotion, spirituality, reflection and connection to God.

There were variations in the format of a Book of Hours but a typical collection contained: a calendar and The Hours, (as described above); a selection of penitential psalms, expressing sorrow for the committing of sins; The Office for the Dead, (a prayer cycle for the repose of the soul of a deceased person); and the Litany of Saints, which were prayers for the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the martyrs and saints. Books of Hours represented a layperson's handbook to Christian devotion and were created in a portable format so they could be carried by the owner and referred to on a daily basis. They reveal a glimpse into the medieval relationship between humanity and God and are important compendiums of religious reflection.

In the modern secular society of the UK we can underestimate the importance of the Christian calendar in medieval times. This was an unwavering structure in an uncertain world and the progression from Christmas to Easter to Ascension was embedded in the minds and habits of everyone. The monastic life was seen as the epitome of social behaviour and for an ordinary person to possess access to the religious life, in book form, was highly desirable. It was common in medieval art, and also in the pages of the Books of Hours, for the patrons who had commissioned them to be depicted in religious scenes: such as witnessing the birth of Christ or worshipping at the feet of the Virgin, thus placing themselves directly into the holy narrative. In the medieval mind saints could be 'talked to' through prayer and requests to God, Jesus and Mary were as common as our 'wish lists' of shopping needs.

Katherine Swift, in *The Morville Hours*, a contemporary version of a Book of Hours, acknowledged the desirability and influence of the medieval texts: 'They are at once the most visible and the most intimate of medieval books, very widely disseminated yet used in an intensely private manner by individuals, often women, in the privacy of their own chambers' (Swift, 2008, p. viii). She also calls them 'The "best sellers" of their day.'

The most noted example of a Book of Hours created for a wealthy patron is the *Très Riches Heures* commissioned by John, the Duke of Berry between 1412–16 and illustrated by the brothers Limbourg. This is currently held in the Musée Condé in Chantilly, France (Limbourg, 2011). The Duke of Berry was a passionate collector of books and his library contained more than 15 Books of Hours. The *Tres Riches Heures* is a supreme example. The

illuminated pages are exquisitely illustrated; they depict a calendar of the month, the signs of the Zodiac and scenes from life, according to the seasons. In the page for October a white-clad horse pulls a harrow and a farmer sows seeds over which crows and magpies are already fighting. In the background is a magnificent white castle. The pages of this book offer a detailed insight into the lives of the various strata of medieval society, from aristocratic hunters to peasants in rags. This keen depiction of everyday detail is a feature of other Books of Hours, where scenes from the Bible are set against a backdrop of recognizable scenes of medieval life. A Book of Hours can also be seen as an interactive text as these books were not intended to be read chronologically. The reader chose which readings to refer to according to time of day, season and spiritual mood.

What I gained from my understanding of the medieval Books of Hours and what I felt I could translate into my project were the following aspects: the text, the structure, the visual qualities and the portability. The text, (in my case the poems) would be an embarking point for reflection. This reflection would not be a religious one but a contemplative one, offering responses to the modern world. It would be presented in a calendar format akin to the original Books of Hours, following the months of the year, times of day and the seasons. It would contain a linear structure (a calendar year) but the reader/viewer could choose when and where they accessed the films. I wanted to somehow replicate the everydayness of the medieval Books of Hours, and to depict the 'illustrations in the margins' and by creating a digital project which utilizes our accessibility to screens and downloads, I could also replicate the portability of the medieval books.

The first modern Book of Hours I investigated was Rilke's *Book of Hours*, (*Das Studenbuch)* (Rilke & Deutsch, 1941) which was written, in German, in three parts between 1899 and 1903. It is a philosophical as well as a religious text, for Rilke was not a conventional Christian and the God he addresses is a human-facing God rather than a remote entity. His manner of addressing God is personal and direct. Rilke is looking for answers, for meaning in life, but he is also conflicted about what he sees as the visceral link between man and deity:

'Put out my eyes, and I can see you still;
slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;
and without any feet can go to you;
and tongueless, I can conjure you at will' (Rilke & Deutsch, 1941, p. 37).

Rilke challenges not that a god exists but that God needs mankind in order to exist. The link between man and God is inescapable:

'What will you do, God, when I die?... you lose your meaning, losing me' (Rilke & Deutsch, 1941, p. 31).

Rilke's impassioned search is not one that I share but I did appreciate his direct and simple language, and the way he addresses an unseen person, 'Put out my eyes, and I can see you still; slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet' (Rilke & Deutsch, 1941, p. 37). I was particularly interested in his use of questions, sometimes rhetorical or sometimes as an opening gambit for further dialogue. 'What will you do, God when I die? When I your broken pitcher lie?' (Rilke & Deutsch, 1941, p. 31). I use plenty of questions in my own poetry, 'Wild girl where are you now?' 'Did they know that they were dying?' 'Will you find a mountain top with a silver palace?' (English, 2018). The poems most informed by my reading of Rilke are *Drive Through the Night* (English, 2018, p. 42) and *Now is the Time* (English, 2018, p. 23). The first is addressed to my dying brother as he contemplates a death with no belief in an afterlife; and the second reflects how one memory can link one event to another, but the overall feeling is still of loneliness: 'I throw bread to the ducks but they do not come'.

What I did not find in Rilke's poetry was richness of description and a specificity of location. His fields, clouds and seas are generalized rather than particular. Much of the poetry for *The Book of Hours* was written in various locations in the Welsh Marches. This was unintentional. I wanted to go away and write and in July 2015 I booked a cottage within two hours' drive of my home. However, the surrounding landscape, the apparent remoteness of the location, the lushness of the hedgerows and a pervading sense of history crept into the poetry; and on subsequent writing breaks I have chosen to be near or in The Golden Valley in Herefordshire. I do not live here but it feels like this stretch of country is my spiritual heartland. To convey this sense of connectedness to the landscape, I looked to the prose of nature writers.

Some current approaches to writing about landscape

There has been a resurgence recently in writing about the British countryside, not writing it as a history or as a reference guide but writing about the experience of it, akin to the work of the nineteenth-century writer Richard Jefferies, who explored emotional connection to place. Most well-known is Robert MacFarlane who has walked through many remote places in the UK and reflected on his experience of being there (Emmanuel College Cambridge, 2007). This type of writing contains detailed and knowledgeable observations about wildlife and flora, descriptions of weather patterns, and plenty of historical and biographical reflection. Other writers have contributed to this body of work such as poet Kathleen Jamie, who writes about the Scottish coast; Anna Pavord, the garden writer; Stephen Moss who writes about wildlife; and Katherine Swift whose *The Morville Hours*, is the story of the creation of a garden (Swift, 2008).

Swift acknowledges the influence of the early Books of Hours on her initial plans for her garden and also in the structure of her account. The chapters are divided into sections with the names of the original 'hours', and each chapter represents the changing seasons.

Her previous work as Keeper of Early Manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin gave her an intimate knowledge of these manuscripts, and she, like me, is fascinated by the detail:

> 'In the world of the Books of Hours, tiny emblematic figures dig, prune, sow, chop wood, mow grass, reap grain, tread grapes, each in their allotted month' (Swift, 2008, p. 9).

> She mourns the loss of the agricultural and religious calendar in modern life: 'In a world of electric light and central heating, where one month is much like another, and vegetables are flown from Kenya …' (Swift, 2008, p. 9).

Not only have we lost our connection with the seasons, we have lost our connection with the 'great story' of the Christian calendar, the story of birth, growth, death and rebirth. *The Morville Hours* is an attempt to draw our attention back to the wonder and beauty of the growing world as seen through the eyes of a passionate gardener. At the heart of the narrative is the construction of her garden and her emotional progress as she develops it. Gardens, she realizes only exist because somebody gardens them, and her time on Earth is limited:

> 'As I grow older, the wild roses press against the outside of the yew hedges; the long grass whispers to me. A garden is a process, not a product' (Swift, 2008, p. 332).

She connects to her reader by placing her descriptions of her garden in the present tense, even though we learn that she started working on it in 1988. We are drawn into her sense of wonder as she addresses us directly:

> 'Don't blink. Beneath the wall the bearded irises are in bloom, the tall uppermost petals so gauzy, so delicate, that each bloom, once opened, lasts hardly longer than a day. Look, you can almost see through them' (Swift, 2008, p. 168).

This is a clever strategy and is probably one of the reasons why so many people, including myself, love this book. Her prose is intoxicating and her use of detailed descriptions and sense of timelessness do indeed create for me a similar response to reading an illuminated manuscript.

As a critical reader, although I enjoy the way she writes about irises, or roses, or lavender I am aware that her account has airbrushed out much of her life. We only learn via a few sentences that she took on work for the National Trust and David Austin Roses, that she became ill with ME; that she possibly is bi-polar and certainly an obsessive:

'He (her husband) understood, and continues to understand why I can't bear to come in until long after dark, why I spend all my money and then borrow more, why I am always exhausted, always late for everything, never want to go on holiday' (Swift, 2008, p. 332).

In my Book of Hours, I want to shine more light onto the complicated areas of human experience. I am aware that my relationship with the natural world is not straightforward. I love being in a stone cottage, and writing about landscape, but I live in a city. I am far too used to the trappings of urban living, coffee shops, fast internet, circle of friends, to give these up and live in a remote location. I can recognize some wildflowers and birds, but I do not have the deep knowledge of a nature writer such as Stephen Moss:

'On either side of the path, I hear the echoing song of eight different species of warbler. Chiffchaffs constantly call out their name ...' (Moss, 2017, p. 265).

Eight species of warblers! I am aware when I am in the countryside how uninformed I am. I want to explore the tension between appreciating landscape and not knowing how to interpret it. In my poems such as *Aubade, Sheltering From the Rain in a Country Church,* and *Can't Sleep* (English, 2018), my narrator is displaced, dislocated and alone. For a city dweller, the British countryside can be disturbing. Cottages are dark and dingy and cold. A day of rain can make walking impossible and more rain can interrupt driving. Roads get blocked by fallen trees, strayed cattle and slurries of mud. And the wifi is slow. Our countryside is not benign. According to the Health and Safety Executive 74 people were killed by cows between 2001–15 (Health and Safety Executive, 2015).

I have created the project on the premise that many viewers of *The Book of Hours* will be city dwellers like myself; and because it is a transnational project many of the viewers will not be British. It is a common mistake for visitors to look at a map of the UK and think that one can visit London, Bath, Edinburgh, Cambridge and Oxford in two days because they seem so close together in terms of distance. I want to explore the reality of modern Britain and how our countryside is at odds with our urban lifestyle. In *Night Walk* (English, 2018, p. 30) my narrator is confused by the unexpected darkness of a country lane at night, and *Things I Found in the Hedge* (English, 2018, p. 65) include a used tampon and a Kit Kat wrapper.

Inspired by *The Morville Hours* I also want to bring my readers into the writing and create a sense of contemplation by using specific descriptions, direct speech and the present tense:

'The rain has stopped. I like the feel of empty quiet. I have too often chosen this instead of company. I wonder how much I have missed? I go outside and

goldfinches skim across a wildflower meadow of blue campanulas and purple knapweed' (English, 2018, p. 40).

I am, however, writing poetry for *The Book of Hours*, not prose. Poetry about landscape has a long history in the UK and many poets both classic and modern have turned to their immediate locality for inspiration.

In my research for this project I revisited many poets from Wordsworth to Alice Oswald, and I have noted how Edward Thomas leaves his poems on a melancholy note, how Ted Hughes turns to the Anglo-Saxon for impact and is not afraid to tackle the blood and guts of the countryside. How R. S. Thomas writes with care about rural characters and how Philip Larkin reminds us of the constant interruption of the modern world. My *Sheltering from the Rain in a Country Church* (English, 2018, p. 40) is a creative response to his poem *Church Going.* Alice Oswald gives us the multiplicity of voices, historic and imagined, contained in landscape, and her keen eye takes in the details of plants and trees. Paul Farley writes without sentimentality about the past and uses humour to draw us into his poems. Other poets whose work I found useful include; Basil Bunting, Michael Horovitz, Peter Riley and Pauline Stainer.

Poetry about landscape has become the place for an experimental approach. Poets such as Basil Bunting used dialect words and words from older vocabularies, such as Norse, to describe the subtleties of the countryside. Harriet Tarlo, in her introduction to *The Ground Aslant*, says

'Language is the form in which landscape can come alive' (Tarlo, 2011, p. 10).

She is one of a group of contemporary poets who produce what she calls, 'Radical landscape poetry' and although the poets in her edited anthology write about different locations she sees them as having similar aims:

'There is a recognition that this process of shift and adaption occurs in a world in which natural and cultural, wild and urban or industrial elements exist in all those places where we exist' (Tarlo, 2011, p. 12).

I certainly feel close to this statement. I am aware that my urban trappings come with me wherever I go. I cannot escape my need to find petrol or the sounds of the transatlantic planes in the sky above me, or my worry about burglars if I leave the windows open.

The poets in *The Ground Aslant* write about the experience of being in landscape, often walking through it, witnessing what they see and feel, and it can read like field notes, intense, fragmented and breathless. The poets I was most drawn to in

this collection were Zoe Skoulding, Helen Macdonald, Harriet Tarlo and Carol Watts, who writes about mid Wales. They are also all women. How can women write about landscape without drifting into a pagan/goddess/ancient religion narrative? One way is through close observation. Here are the opening lines from Zoe Skoulding's 'In the forest where they fell':

> 'Everything's here at once, the green relieved
>
> by streaks and veins of lighter tints and black. Purplish
>
> glaucous berries. Time spirals out of seed/pushed inside its grave:' (Tarlo, 2011, p. 130).

I like that she doesn't tell us what the berries are (remember those eight types of warblers?); maybe she doesn't know. We experience the scene as she experiences it.

These poets also stretch language and form. Carol Watt's 'Zeta Landscape' poetry cycle has little punctuation and uses spaces in the sentences to suggest a pause for breath. Harriet Tarlo places words and phrases all over the page to suggest the way the eye travels across a scene and where our attention lands. Helen Macdonald uses dialect and archaic words to give a vocabulary to actions and things that are not modern: 'spreketh', ' cuttle', 'falln'.

I certainly have been encouraged by this approach to be more experimental and to play more with form and language. In 'Night Walk' and 'Can't Sleep' (English, 2018) I have broken up the sentences to replicate the train of thought and the interaction with the immediate environment. Both poems are set in darkness and I have tried to explore the dislocating experience of realizing that 'dark' in the countryside can mean that there is no light at all. For a habitual city dweller, this can be terrifying.

> 'Stop. Remember something about how long it takes for eyes to adjust.
> Close my eyes. Count to twenty … sixty.
> My other senses jolt.
> I can smell the hedge. Greeny wet, and the grass, fresh sweeter.
> A small rustle. A field mouse? Shrew?' (English, 2018, p. 30).

As a spoken word poet, I am also concerned about the sound of words. The work of Basil Bunting was useful here. Bunting made up words, used forgotten words, created words to convey his emotional connection to landscape. There are a few spoken word poets in the UK who use this experimental approach to language and Hannah Silva is the most noted (Silva, 2013). Her performances rely on the control of her voice and her movements to

convey meaning. Her 2015 performance *Schlock* uses British Sign Language and she remarks in her blog how she had to focus on her body for this show:

> 'Where my spoken language might skip details of character, place and attitude, this is an intrinsic part of sign language. The materiality of the body and face took the role that in my work is usually played by the materiality of the voice' (Silva, 2015).

I am aware that my viewer will experience the poetry in *The Book of Hours* through sound rather than through gestures or body movements. I have been told that I am a 'good reader' of my work. I use pauses and emphasis of certain words to bring out the meaning and emotions. I hope that my viewer can hear the sadness of the mother whose grown up daughter has not stayed long enough in 'River Girl':

> 'When she's gone I wash the plates. Do the laundry.
> Her dress is on the floor. Crumpled in a corner.
> A thrush on the steps breaks open a snail' (English, 2018, p. 33).

To discover more about the sound of words, I investigated the work of spoken word poets, Joelle Taylor, Salena Godden and Malaika Kegode, both the written and filmed versions of their poetry. From Joelle, I learned how to be more confident, to write in a voice that was not my own but without appropriation, as from the point of view of a refugee in my poem *Numbers* and a mother in war-torn Syria in *The Last Days* (English, 2018). From Salena I learned how to tell it straight and to not hold back from detail, and from Malaika how to write about the personal in a lyrical way and utilize the beauty of a soft voice.

Although I enjoyed the experimental approach of *The Ground Aslant* and the notion that poems can benefit from being read and read again, even when I read some of them aloud I felt I was no closer to understanding them. I do not want to put off my viewers by being obscure. So, I have made the decision not to go fully down the experimental path for *The Book of Hours*. I may tease my audiences with word and sound play but I want them to find something they can relate to in each poem and want to revisit it. In the next section I will examine the changing nature of the audiences for spoken word poetry.

The Changing Audience for Spoken Word poetry

The audience for spoken word is larger (in terms of numbers), more diverse, and possibly less poetically aware than the audience for the radical landscape poets (Bearder, 2019, p. 14). When I first started performing poetry back in the mid-nineties most spoken word was dismissed by the page poet gatekeepers as irrelevant. In an essay published online, poet Kwame Dawes describes this attitude towards what he calls 'street poetry': 'At

the heart of this relegation is an emphasis on its 'otherness', its peripheral position in relation to the mainstream' (Dawes, 1996, p. 18).

Performance poetry was seen as the noisy, scruffy little sister of the great big brother of 'proper poetry'. It was seen as artless, unstructured, too emotional and messy, and this attitude still persists (Watts, 2018). The reaction to this by the spoken word community was to say 'So what?' and the scene developed its own heroes and champions who were not on the lists of Carcanet, Faber and Bloodaxe. Katie Ailes describes how irrelevant the whole issue of publication was for many performance poets:

'This singular focus on "Are you published?" is inherently insulting to performance poets for whom print publication is beside the point of their creative practice' (Ailes, 2015).

There are some key players from those early days, such as Francesca Beard, who have received accolades and awards but who are still not in print (Beard, 2012). This lack of printed material led the spoken word poets to be more creative with how they distributed their work. The live performance was the bedrock of this type of poetry; but spoken word poets recorded themselves and sold CDs, filmed themselves and put the clips on YouTube and on their websites. Their work could now be accessed outside of the live performance and by anybody who wanted to access it. It could be argued that the rise of interest in spoken word is solely down to YouTube sharing (Bel, 2016). Current 'stars' of the spoken word scene, such as Kate Tempest, Hollie McNish, Buddy Wakefield and Shane Koyczan did not invent this phenomenon, but they have benefitted from it. The current explosion of spoken word is largely a result of this democratization of reproduction and distribution.

The situation is now more complex. Indie publishers started to publish spoken word poets, such as Burning Eye Books whose first publication was in 2012 (Birnie, 2012). There was a hunger by people who had witnessed spoken word poetry, either as a live performance or as a YouTube clip, to read it. The availability of spoken word poetry in print form has been a game-changer, certainly in the UK. Major publishers have also woken up to the presence of new audiences. Donald Futers, Commissioning Editor at Penguin Press states:

'There's a strong case for our finding ourselves right now in a golden age for poetry. Creative writing programmes, an abundance of new publications, the ever-growing popularity of spoken word and performance poetry' (Futers, 2017).

When spoken word appeared in printed form the quality of the writing and the craft was made more visible. A live performance can seem artless: the poet talks and we listen, we become involved in the performance and we do not notice how the poet has used

repetition, or alliteration, or metaphor or many of the devices that we ascribe to excellent poetry. In print the 'artlessness' of spoken word poetry can be challenged. It is evident how the poet has used words in a deliberate and crafted fashion even if they do not have a traditional poetic background.

There is not the space here to investigate how this new accessibility of printed spoken word is changing the UK poetry scene, but the work of Kate Tempest is now discussed on BBC Radio Four and in newspapers such as The Guardian and The Telegraph. Three spoken word poets were shortlisted for the 2017 Ted Hughes award, which favours 'excellence' in poetry and 'outstanding' contributions to 'cultural life': Salena Godden, Jay Barnard and Hollie McNish (The Poetry Society, 2009). The 2017 winner was Hollie McNish with *Nobody Told Me,* a collection of spoken word pieces and reflections on being a new mother. Previous winners of this award have included established published poets such as Alice Oswald, Lavinia Greenlaw and the former Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion; so, spoken word poetry has now truly grown up.

However, this growth of printed spoken word and its phenomenal popularity has received criticism. Now that spoken word is available in a printed form it can be critiqued more readily by those more used to reading poetry. The argument whether spoken word is poetry is similar to the one levelled at songwriters, such as Bob Dylan, who have received awards for their writing (Orr, 2017).

David Orr writing in The New York Times says that, 'poets have often benefitted from the blurred edge of their discipline' (Orr, 2017). Following from this argument, if a song lyric can be a poem, why can't a piece of spoken word be considered as poetry?

Rebecca Watts' inflammatory 2018 article in *Poetry Review* reveals the disdain that some members of the poetic community still have towards the spoken word community. She claims that the popularity of spoken word poetry is not a measure of its worth and its followers can be likened to Trump supporters:

'Like the new president, the new poets are products of a cult of personality, which demands from its heroes only that they be 'honest' and 'accessible', where honesty is defined as the constant expression of what one feels, and accessibility means the complete rejection of complexity, subtlety, eloquence and the aspiration to do anything well' (Watts, 2018).

According to Ms Watts, Hollie McNish does not warrant applause and her writing can barely be called 'poetry':

'her usual style of garbled literal statements with the odd approximate rhyme thrown in' (Watts, 2018).

She also believes that editors such as Don Paterson from Carcanet, and reviewers who give space to the 'new poets' in the broadsheets only do so out of fear:

'The middle-aged, middle-class reviewing sector is terrified of being seen to disparage the output of young, self-styled "working-class" artists' (Watts, 2018).

These are incendiary statements and the spoken word community roared back with complaint (Bearder, 2019, p. 21). Why did Ms Watts focus her critique on young female poets? Why didn't she examine a wider cohort of talent? Why didn't she even try to understand the differences in craft between a poem written for the page and one written for performance?

Peter Bearder, a spoken word poet and theorist, has, since the publication of the Watts article, been keen to explore a more positive critique of the craft of spoken word and to start to define benchmarks of excellence both in performance and writing. His collection of essays establishes the spoken word poet as an innovator with language and form (Bearder, 2019).

Spoken word poets can now develop their craft further and see the wider possibilities of combining words with moving image. Spoken word poets, due to their previous status as poetic outsiders, have always been innovators. They championed the quality of live readings, and audiences now complain about the unwillingness of some 'famous' page poets to engage with them at live events. Spoken word poets have learned to adapt their work to print, to question their use of language and to find out what layout on the page best suits; and this has been a huge learning curve, helped by editors of small publishers. What I hope to do with *The Book of Hours* is to show how spoken word poetry can adapt further and flourish in poetry film form. A 'film' can be more than a visual recording of me performing a poem, just as a 'reading' is more than me reading words from a book.

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