

# The Performance of Poeticity: Stage Fright and Text Anxiety in Dutch Performance Poetry since the 1960s

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**Abstract:** The relation between performance poetry and poetry criticism, as the latter is generally practiced in newspapers and journals, appears to be strained. This is the result of a clash between two different performance traditions: on the one hand, a tradition that goes back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conventions of poetry declamation or recitation; and on the other hand, a tradition based on performance experiments carried out by avant-garde movements during the first half of the twentieth-century. This article charts the different sets of expectations associated with these traditions by analyzing how these expectations became manifest during the Dutch poetry event 'Poëzie in Carré' (February 28th, 1966). As will become clear, individual authorship, textual unity, and poetic significance play important, yet very different roles in these two traditions. Furthermore, I put forward an alternative approach to the issue at hand, by focusing on one particular participant in 'Poëzie in Carré,' Johnny van Doorn (1944-1991). Thus, this article aims to contribute to a historically aware and more constructive analysis of performance poetry.

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The increasing visibility of performance poetry in the literary field of the Netherlands since the 1960s has resulted in a deadlock in Dutch literary criticism. Literary reviewers shy away from reviewing performance poetry, and on the rare occasion that they do reflect on a publication by a poet of stage or slam fame, they generally do so in disapproving terms. Writing on a collection of poems by Tjitske Jansen, known for her stage personality, the critic Koen Vergeer, for example, criticizes the "all too contrived aiming at effect that always works well on stage, but results in weakness when put to paper" (Vergeer 2003).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Piet Gerbrandy, poetry critic for *de Volkskrant*, doubts whether the "lyrics" of the performance poet Serge van Duijnhoven would "hold on paper." His final judgment is merciless: "The problem with [Van Duijnhoven's poetry] is the almost total lack of gripping images, while only very rarely is the language handled efficiently."<sup>2</sup> In his review of Ingmar Heytze's *Aan de bruid* (2000) ['To the Bride'], Jos Joosten, poetry critic for *De Standaard*, analyzes the 'problem' of performance poetry in a similar way: "The comprehensibility and the much-needed

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<sup>1</sup> "al te gewild effectbejag dat het op het podium altijd goed doet, maar in bundels leidt tot slapte."

<sup>2</sup> "Maar het probleem met *Bloedtest* is de vrijwel totale afwezigheid van pakkende beelden, terwijl er maar heel zelden effectief met de taal wordt omgegaan."

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punch lines, which are part and parcel of a stage performance, inevitably diminish the effect of written poetry.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is significant that the yearly Dutch Championship Poetry Slam has not been seriously reviewed by any major poetry critic since it was organized for the first time in 1998. Dutch critics evidently suffer from stage fright: though they acknowledge that performance poetry cannot be appreciated when it is set down on paper, they continue to display a dogged preference for a formalist, strictly ‘textual’ type of literature and refrain from writing on the actual practice of performance poetry.

At the same time, performance poets turn their back on traditional (literary magazine and newspaper) criticism. “It seems to me that the previous generations of poets, critics and connoisseurs can be blamed for locking up poetry in an ivory tower,” writes Heytze: “Academic drivel is still the norm; poetry that any normal human being would fling into the corner, weeping with boredom.”<sup>4</sup> He is not alone in his rejection of traditional criticism: Tom Lanoye also criticizes what he calls the “hegemony of the scriptural” (Vergeer 2000: 325).<sup>5</sup> And in the introduction to the collection *Sprong naar de sterren* (1999) [‘Leap for the Stars’], containing work by poets who explicitly associate themselves with a performance tradition (such as Heytze, Arjan Witte, Bart F.M. Droog and others), the editor Ruben van Gogh claims that a “new dimension” has been added to poetry, “a dimension that has to be located outside the literary world.” He adds that “In Dutch newspapers and magazines one reads hardly anything about this, since these review poetry according to traditional literary ways of thinking. Consequently, new developments are hardly noticed” (Van Gogh 5).<sup>6</sup> Quite a number of performance poets back up this rejection of textual forms of reviewing (as deployed in the academic world, in newspapers and literary magazines) by emphasizing the oral roots of their work. Van Duijnhoven’s performance collective ‘De Sprooksprekers’ [‘The Tale-tellers’] for example claims to revitalize the medieval tradition of storytelling and Lanoye insists that he is an actor in the body of an author (Brems 649-52; Vergeer 2000: 328).

As a consequence of their resistance to literary criticism, performance poets have developed a different, more elusive mode of evaluation. In the Dutch slam circuit, evaluative practices are either completely democratized by the use of a clapometer, or ‘performed’ by an elected jury during or immediately after the slam. An analysis of about sixty written accounts of poetry slams, all of which took place in Festina Lente, an Amsterdam pub that forms the stage for a highly regarded monthly slam, revealed that the latter form of criticism is based on criteria such as the looks of the performer, his authenticity, and his diversity in performance style (Franssen 2009: 238-42). Needless to say, these criteria would be difficult to apply to written poetry.

Thus, performance poets are fundamentally distrustful of the written word. This

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<sup>3</sup> “De verstaanbaarheid en de broodnodige punchlines die een podiumoptreden vereist, doen onontkoombaar af aan het effect van geschreven poëzie.”

<sup>4</sup> “Ik vind dat vorige generaties dichters, critici en kenners kan worden verweten dat ze de poëzie in een ivoren toren hebben opgesloten. Academisch geneuzel is nog altijd de norm; poëzie die een normaal mens huilend van verveling in een hoek gooit.”

<sup>5</sup> “hegemonie van het schriftuurlijke.”

<sup>6</sup> “een dimensie die buiten de literaire wereld gezocht moet worden. In de Nederlandse kranten en tijdschriften lees je daar nog weinig over, daar wordt de poëzie voornamelijk besproken volgens traditioneel literaire zienswijzen. Nieuwe ontwikkelingen worden op deze manier nauwelijks opgemerkt.”

distrust manifests itself on several levels of their literary praxis, as has become clear: they distance themselves from the formal practice and aesthetic preferences of traditional literary critics; they emphasize the oral roots of their work; and they develop their own, instantaneous practices of evaluation, on the basis of criteria that are for the most part incompatible with written poetry criticism. When one takes into account that some Dutch performance poets even refrain from publishing their poetry in print altogether, it becomes possible to conclude that this reserved attitude towards written poetry amounts to a genuine text anxiety.

This mutual incomprehension between performance poets and poetry critics in the Dutch literary domain has been explained in several ways. Thomas Vaessens maintains that these poets cannot be understood by the critics because the former “do not operate according to the classic avant-garde scenario, which stipulates that the young revolutionary make a start by first establishing his or her position vis-à-vis the previous generation of poetic innovators” (Vaessens 72).<sup>7</sup> Because Dutch performance poets, according to Vaessens, refrain from defining their position in relation to the literature of preceding generations, the work of those performers lacks the “literary frame of reference” that most critics rely on. Vaessens believes that this is a major source of misunderstanding: while the critics look for “literary references” and a sophisticated, “complex interweaving” with literary history, which would be “characteristic for paper poetry in the tradition of the avant-garde,” the performers opt for “the immediacy of the performance” (72).<sup>8</sup> Bertram Mourits, on the other hand, is less concerned with the supposed lack of literary references in performance poetry, but argues that the poetics of modernism, which have long dominated Dutch criticism, lie at the heart of the problem. Modernism’s preference for ambiguity and polysemy has hindered the critical acceptance of performance poetry, according to Mourits (338).

Vaessens’ and Mourits’ explanations, however, are not satisfactory, for it has been pointed out that performing poets do enter into discussion with literary traditions and do embrace literary experiments. De Geest reminds us that performance poets expressly associate themselves with a “centuries-old oral tradition,” including “the troubadours, medieval literature, the primitive story-tellers and the shaman” (870).<sup>9</sup> And writing on contemporary slam poetry, Brems observes that there is “an undeniable historical line, originating in dada,” linking “the happenings” of the sixties and “performers in the seventies” to a new generation of “recitation poets and poetry slam poets” (651).<sup>10</sup>

In this article I attempt to come to a clearer understanding of the deadlock between Dutch performance poetry and literary criticism. I focus on an event that, according to many performance poets, marked the break-through of ‘podiumpoëzie’ [‘stage poetry’] in

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<sup>7</sup> “handelen niet meer volgens het klassieke avant-gardescenario dat voorschrijft dat de jonge hemelbestormer om te beginnen maar eens zijn of haar positie moet bepalen tegenover de vorige lichter poëzievernieuwers.”

<sup>8</sup> “Voor de literaire referenties en de complexe verwevenheid met de traditie die papieren poëzie uit de traditie van de avant-garde kenmerken, komt de onmiddellijkheid van de *performance* in de plaats.”

<sup>9</sup> “de eeuwenoude traditie die hij wil voortzetten – de troubadours, de middeleeuwse literatuur, de primitieve vertellers en de sjamaan.”

<sup>10</sup> “Er loopt een onmiskenbare historische lijn, met oorsprong in dada, van de Vijftigers over de happenings, via de performers uit de jaren zeventig en de Maximalen, naar deze nieuwe generatie al dan niet rappende podiumdichters en poetryslampoëten.”

the Netherlands: 'Poëzie in Carré' ['Poetry in the Carré Theatre'], on February the 28<sup>th</sup> of 1966. A comparison of the different poetry readings given on that occasion suggests the existence of two performance traditions: on the one hand, a tradition that goes back to the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conventions of poetry declamation or recitation; and on the other hand, a tradition based on the performance experiments carried out by the avant-garde movements during the first half of the twentieth-century. While the former tradition harmonizes with a widespread set of expectations about the qualities of poetry and its evaluation, the latter contradicts these expectations and even deconstructs them. It is therefore possible to view performance poetry's clash with Dutch literary criticism as a 'staging of poeticity'.

The term 'poeticity' is here understood as the potential of a linguistic event to be experienced as poetic. This understanding of poeticity is analogous to the approach of the linguist Roman Jakobson, who, in his classic essay 'What is Poetry?', maintains that utterances are experienced as poetry, because they foreground language's 'poetic function'. This function dominates linguistic usage, Jakobson argues, when the language used is not experienced as a representation of reality or an expression of emotions, but as a medium that draws attention to its own reality and to the process of signification itself.<sup>11</sup> In his analysis, Jakobson focuses mainly on the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of poeticity, but I would argue that such a poetic potential cannot be understood properly without also taking into account the complex of aesthetic assumptions, interpretive conventions and other socio-cultural conditions that allow us to experience an artifact or performance as poetic. With the concept of 'staging', I refer to a linguistic process in which, due to a clash of expectations, such assumptions, conventions and conditions are brought into the light and put into play.

This staging of poeticity, I argue, calls for a different critical approach. The following section lays out such an approach—a 'performative' reading of performance poetry—through an analysis of the work and reception of one particular participant in 'Poëzie in Carré,' Johnny van Doorn, also known as 'Johnny the SelfKicker' (1944-1991). By doing so, I seek to demonstrate that the critical reception of performance poetry is often hampered by tacit assumptions that this poetry is fundamentally at odds with. In the final section of this contribution, I conceptualize an alternative, performative approach. Thus, I hope to contribute to a historically aware and more constructive analysis of this form of literature.

## 1. Performing Poetry in the Sixties and the Conflict between Two Traditions

Many Dutch poets and literary scholars consider 'Poëzie in Carré' the breakthrough of performance poetry in a Dutch context. The event was organized by the poet Simon Vinkenoog, who had attended 'The International Poetry Incarnation,' a large happening at the London Albert Hall, on the 11th of June 1965. At this event, Vinkenoog and eight

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<sup>11</sup> Jakobson states that "poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (378).

thousand others had witnessed performances by famous Beat poets such as Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg. Vinkenoog was determined to organize a similar event in Amsterdam. On the 28th of February 1966 he gathered twenty-five Dutch poets in the Carré Theatre for an evening of poetry readings and performances.

The success of the event was undeniable: the two thousand tickets sold out quickly, the event was broadcast on radio and television, and the newspapers commented extensively on the performances (Vinkenoog 252-276). Furthermore, it inspired Guido Lauwaert to organize a similar festival in Flanders, resulting in the successive 'Nachten van de Poëzie' ['Nights of Poetry'] in 1973, 1975, 1980 and 1984. During those infamous Nights, "the audience, which came in large numbers, could actively participate in a true poetry celebration, where poets read their own work or tried in turn to amuse or provoke the audience with their act," according to De Geest (869).<sup>12</sup> The lasting impact of 'Poëzie in Carré' is also documented by several modern Dutch overviews of literary history, in which the event is mentioned as an important date in Dutch literary history (Goedegebuure 777; Brems 459). Today, some critics even acclaim that particular evening in 1966 as "the birth of the culture of the literary stage" (Rijghard and Wijndelts 21).<sup>13</sup>

At the Carré, the poets who contributed to the evening were united in their aspiration to intensify the communication between the poet and his audience. Yet the individual performances differed significantly from each other. Poets such as A. Roland Holst or Gerrit Kouwenaar faithfully recited their poems from a piece of paper or a collection of their poetry, whereas Ewald Vanvugt and Johnny van Doorn introduced elements of improvisation, experiment and interaction in their performances. Vanvugt, according to one particular critic, put on an "exuberant" show: he read poems containing lines such as "Blits!! Paaaauw!! Zzzzoemmmmm... Kjing-kjing-kjinggg... Tsak! Tsak!," with his fellow poets Van Doorn and Hans Verhagen humming in the background (Vinkenoog 210-212). Van Doorn performed what he called an "electric act": the poet screamed his poems in a high-pitched voice, wildly waving his arms, and imitating with his voice the sounds of fire-works and jazz drum solos. His performance ended (unexpectedly) in a 'grand finale' when the wife of the political cartoonist Opland, pen name of Rob Wout, ran onstage and started to whack the poet with a bouquet of flowers (Goedegebuure 782). The audience was partly amused, partly annoyed. Critics found it difficult to grasp what these poets were attempting to do. One critic dryly remarked that Vanvugt "did not rave any better or worse than he normally does" (Vinkenoog 212).<sup>14</sup> Van Doorn was said to revert to "bizarre shouting," "incoherent, sometimes rather candid exclamations" and "quasi-psychopathic showing off" (Vinkenoog 128-30).<sup>15</sup> "What is he talking about?" one journalist wondered. Another one stated: "[Van Doorn's] words perhaps did not make everyone stop and think" (Vinkenoog 212, 128).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "het in groten getale opgekomen publiek actief participeren aan een waar poëziefest, met dichters die voorlazen uit eigen werk of met hun act het publiek beurtelings trachtten te amuseren of te provoceren."

<sup>13</sup> "de geboorte van de literaire podiumcultuur."

<sup>14</sup> "Ewald Vanvugt raaskalde niet beter of slechter dan hij normaal al doet."

<sup>15</sup> "bizarre kreten"; "onsamenhangende, soms nogal vrijmoedige exclamaties"; "kwasi-psychopathische aanstellerij."

<sup>16</sup> "Waar heeft hij het over?"; "Zijn woorden hebben misschien niet iedereen tot nadenken gestemd."

At the time, Vanvugt's and Van Doorn's acts at 'Poëzie in Carré' may have seemed minor disturbances, but in hindsight they have a far greater significance: they mark the clash between two different performance traditions. Most of the poets who contributed to the event were influenced by the declamatory tradition. This tradition emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when the popularity of recitals, literary contests and public orations gave rise to a genuine "oral cult" (Couttenier and Van den Berg 45).<sup>17</sup> During this period declamatory handbooks, written by rhetoricians, literary scholars and skilled actors, formalized the enunciation of verse (Couttenier and Van den Berg 197). In the Dutch context two publications were particularly influential: B.H. Lulofs' *De declamatie; of de kunst van declaméren of recitéren en van de mondelinge voordragt of uiterlijke welsprekendheid in het algemeen* (1848) ['Declamation; or, The Art of Declamation or Recitation and of the Oral Delivery or Outward Eloquence in General'] and J.M. Larive's *Cours de Déclamation* (1804–1810), which was translated into Dutch in 1856 by G.T.N. Suringar as *De kunst van het declameren* (1856) ['The Art of Declamation'] (Van den Berg 473). The authors described (and prescribed) in great detail the poses, use of intonation and movements that were most appropriate for the recitation of poems. The recitation of a love poem for example had to fulfill different conditions from the reading of an epic work. Two rules in particular seemed to apply to the recitations; they were even deemed essential for a good performance.

The first rule was that the text had to be recited exactly as it was written by the poet; no changes or improvisations were allowed. In his revised handbook *De kunst der mondelingen voordracht of uiterlijke welsprekendheid* (1877) ['The Art of Oral Delivery or Outward Eloquence'], Lulofs stated that the recitation should "conform to all the divisions and parts of that which is recited; to every sentence, constituent, word, syllable, even to the letter" (138).<sup>18</sup> In his *Cours de Déclamation*, Larive pushed the argument even further and argued that "one of the major obstacles" to the "perfection of the art" of declamation was the tendency "to ignore or to neglect punctuation" (23).<sup>19</sup> He even expressed the wish to use "half a comma"—or even "a quarter of a comma"—to indicate the subtle pauses that were needed to convey the full import of the poem (23).

The second rule concerned self-mastery and restraint: no matter how strong the emotions one had to convey, the verse speaker had to control himself at all times. Only "he, who has power over himself, will soon rule over his listeners as well," Larive reminded his readers (8).<sup>20</sup> This rule was commonly accepted, as shown in a poem entitled 'Reciteeren' ['To Recite'], by the nineteenth-century Dutch poet Nicolaas Beets (2: 391).<sup>21</sup> Beets advised all those who wished to recite a poem to:

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<sup>17</sup> "orale cultus."

<sup>18</sup> "dat zij voorts voegt bij al de deelen en onderdeelen van dat voorgedragene, tot bij ieder zin, zinsnede, woord, lettergreep, ja, letter toe."

<sup>19</sup> "Een algemeen gebrek, hetwelk aan de volmaking der kunst het meest in den weg staat, is gelegen in het verkeerd lezen, in het niet inacht nemen der zinsverdeeling, in het voorbijzien of verwaarlozen der scheidteekens."

<sup>20</sup> "hij, die magt heeft over zichzelf, ook spoedig zal kunnen heerschen over zijne toehoorders."

<sup>21</sup> "Laat schoone verzen glad van effen lippen vloeien, / Maar gil, noch galm, noch kwaak, noch bulder woest en luid; / [...] / Gij, blijf uw kalmte, uw kracht, uw meesterschap bewaren, / En daar ge een ander schokt, schijn zelf niet eens ontroerd."

Let beautiful verses flow evenly from smooth lips,  
 But do not scream, nor boom, nor quack, nor roar, wildly and loud;  
 [...]
   
 Keep your composure, maintain your strength, your mastery,  
 And when you shock another, do not even seem moved yourself.

Writing more generally on nineteenth-century recitation practice, Van den Berg concludes that “Declamation is an art that is not based on excess or exaggeration, but that can convince only by restraint” (475).<sup>22</sup>

Even though this tradition of poetry performance was past its prime in the second half of the nineteenth century, and even though it was followed by a radical shift towards a notion of experiencing poetry as an individual and introspective event (Couttenier and Van den Berg 487; Mourits 331; Pfeiler 28), it has continued to influence performance practice up to the present time. At ‘Poëzie in Carré’ the declamatory tradition was dominant: most poets read their own poetry, kept to the letter of the written texts, and kept their composure. They gave a classic poetry reading, just as many of the performance poets in the contemporary Dutch poetry scene do (Franssen 2008: 263). The persistent influence of formal declamation, for that matter, can be observed in other countries as well. In the U.K., for example, as Peter Middleton (*Distant*: 85) points out, contemporary poetry readings “draw upon a long history of training and practice of formal oral performance.” The French Oulipo poet Jacques Roubaud notes in a similar vein that most poetry recited at international poetry festivals is “serious and well behaved” (Roubaud 23). And the American poet Charles Bernstein observes that “literal reproduction of a prescribed source” seems to be the “most marked ‘performative’ style of poetry presentations” (Bernstein 142-144).

The difference between performers like Vanvugt and Van Doorn on the one hand, and poets like Kouwenaar on the other, becomes clear when one considers the lasting impact of the declamatory tradition. Vanvugt and Van Doorn draw their inspiration from avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Expressionism and Surrealism. Van Doorn acknowledged his affinity with avant-garde performances when he explained that he was influenced by the Swiss Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen, “several Dada-poets” (Dütting 16, 77) and the French playwright Antonin Artaud (Van Doorn 173). In contrast to the classic style of poetry reading, this performance tradition, with its roots in the historical avant-garde and the countercultural experiments of the post-war period, foregrounds improvisation, experiment, interaction and a willingness to lose control over the performance. Unlike the practice of declamation, the avant-garde performance has never been formalized in handbooks or in a generally acknowledged system of rules. Still, one can distinguish several structural tendencies within the avant-garde performance tradition. These will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Not only did ‘Poëzie in Carré’ mark the break-through of performing poets in the Netherlands, but the Carré Theatre also realized a space in which an intriguing clash

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<sup>22</sup> “Declameren is een kunst, die het niet van overdaad of overdrijving moet hebben, maar slechts overtuigt door terughoudendheid.”

occurred between two contrary performance traditions: one tradition based on classic declamation and another inspired by the experiments of the avant-gardes. The performances of Vanvugt and Van Doorn conflicted with—and thereby revealed—widespread notions on what it means to bring poetry to the stage. In other words, these performers *staged* poeticity: they dramatized the presuppositions and conventions that enable one to experience a specific linguistic event as something poetic. The question, then, becomes: what exactly were these assumptions and conventions with regard to poetry and its performance, and how were they staged?

## 2. Performance, Poetry, and the Limits of Criticism

The similarities between Dutch poetry readings in the 1960s and the experimental practices of the avant-garde movements allow us to reconsider the problematic relationship between performance poetry and literary criticism. The avant-garde is often considered anti-traditional, nihilistic or anarchistic (Poggioli ch. 4). Several studies, however, suggest that the crisis caused by avant-garde performance art creates the opportunity to rethink traditional notions on art and literature (Goldberg 1988; Clemons 2003; Sell 2005). Mike Sell, for instance, draws a distinction between an institutionalized, critically appropriated avant-garde performance and a radical, ‘countercultural’ avant-garde performance (48). He goes on to define countercultural performances in the 1950s and 1960s as events that “challenge the basic assumptions, methods, and institutional bases of criticism and scholarship” (8). He stresses that these assumptions, methods and institutional conditions pertain not only to the domain of art criticism or academic scholarship, but also to a wider “cultural politics,” to wit the bourgeois-liberal discourse governing the production, distribution, and consumption of culture. Countercultural performance challenges this discourse and creates a crisis, according to Sell, who underlines the virtuous and productive aspects of this tension:

Countercultural performance addressed the need (1) to identify and disrupt existing social, cultural, and economic boundaries, (2) to systematically challenge existing discourses of experience, everyday life, and the politics of culture, (3) to produce new ways of thinking and acting that effectively valued aspects of experience, everyday life, and culture systematically excluded from the mainstream, and (4) to ground all of this in specific social and cultural situations. (16)

Sell’s observations on the ability of avant-garde performances to “identify and disrupt” existing “cultural [...] boundaries” and to challenge the “politics of culture” apply to the performance of poetry and its reception as well. Sell reminds his readers that all “culture is composed of various kinds of institutionalized and socialized hermeneutic strategies” (33). With respect to literature, such strategies can be defined either as a form of “literary competence,” to use Culler’s term (113-130), or as a set of rules governing an “interpretive community,” as Fish (171) would argue, but the main point is that the interpretation and evaluation of poetry is shaped and colored by a cluster of conventions

that determine how a work of literature should be read. These conventions become part of the institution of literature when they are put to practice in textbooks, works of criticism, or in literary theory. They are internalized by most professional poetry readers. The result of this process of internalization is an “implicit theory of the lyric,” as Culler (162) puts it in *Structuralist Poetics*.

Culler distinguishes three expectations that guide most interpretations. The first expectation concerns the enunciator of the poem. Readers assume that the poem is uttered by a “poetic persona” which “fulfils the unifying role of the individual subject” (Culler 170). The poem is understood as the message of a single subject to whom all utterances can be traced back. The second expectation pertains to the belief that a poem is a “harmonious totality” (Culler 171). All of its elements are expected to relate to each other in a meaningful way. The third and last expectation is that the poem has significance:

To write a poem is to claim significance of some sort for the verbal construct one produces, and the reader approaches a poem with the assumption that however brief it may appear it must contain, at least implicitly, potential riches which make it worthy of his attention. (Culler 175)

This last expectation, I suggest, does not only pertain to the poem; it extends to the author’s poetics or his literary program as well. The reader tacitly assumes that the poet takes his own writing seriously and has thought out his poetry: the poet is assumed to formulate a consistent and coherent poetics and is expected to act accordingly to it.

The three conventions discerned by Culler are, of course, historically and culturally fixed. They are part and parcel of an implicit theory of poetry that dominated Anglo-Saxon critical and academic discourse on literature from the New Critics to the Structuralists. In their 2006 study Joosten and Vaessens have demonstrated that these conventions have had a lasting impact on criticism in the Netherlands. Taking their lead from Gillis Dorleijn (115-128), who demonstrated that Dutch poetry text books can be seen as ‘mirrors’ that reflect common assumptions about poetry from a certain era, Joosten and Vaessens analyzed post-war textbooks “as they have been used in the Dutch and Flemish classrooms” in order to reconstruct “the dominant presuppositions governing the reading of poetry” (20). Joosten and Vaessens identified three ‘classic’ interpretive premises. The first premise is that “the text represents a subject, it allows us to hear an authentic ‘voice’”; a second basic assumption entails that “even when [the poem] initially strikes the reader as chaotic, [it] will show its inner coherence on a higher level”; and the third premise states that “the poem is an ‘organic’ whole and is valued as ‘natural’ and as a source of exceptional knowledge.” (Joosten and Vaessens 21-22)<sup>23</sup> The three premises identified by Joosten and Vaessens correspond to the conventions of the poetic persona, of the expectation of coherence, and of significance, as identified by Culler. This suggests that the main New Critical and Structuralist assumptions about poetry continue to dominate critical discourse in the Netherlands.

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<sup>23</sup> Joosten and Vaessens elaborate their argument in the first part of *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Vaessens and Joosten 15-30).

Moreover, these general assumptions fit in very well with the characteristics of the declamatory tradition in Dutch performance poetry. The poets read their own poetry and maintain self-control, and in so doing, satisfy the expectation of a single speaking subject and of an authentic voice. They are faithful to the written texts, in accordance with the convention of coherence: the text is enunciated as an organic whole that should not be altered when performing it. Finally, the fact that these poets perfect their enunciation and keep their composure is in line with the convention of significance as well: they demonstrate in this way that they take their work seriously and that it is worthy of the listener's attention.

The correspondences between the conventions of poetry and the tradition of declamation came to the fore on the stage of Carré in 1966. Most poets performing at 'Poëzie in Carré' adhered to the principles of declamation and in doing so, fulfilled the dominant expectations of poetry. Vanvugt and Van Doorn, however, did not respond to these expectations. The criticism raised against them is quite revealing in that sense. Descriptions of their performances in pejorative terms such as 'raving,' 'bizarre shouting' and "quasi-psychopathic showing off" indicate that their critics had expected to encounter an authentic voice and a central, more or less composed persona. They had expected (self-)mastery, not what they considered the antics of two madmen. Furthermore, the characterization of Van Doorn's act as "incoherent" shows that a convention of coherence was operative in the evaluative discourse. Another critic who complained that Van Doorn's poetry "did not make everyone stop and think" was applying the convention of significance: in his opinion poetry *should* make one stop and think (Vinkenoog 128-130, 212).

Vanvugt's and Van Doorn's performances effectively staged the then-dominant conventions of poetry. In their performances the traditional preconceptions about what it means to write and perform poetry were thwarted and, consequently, exposed. In the following section, an analysis of the poetry of one of the performers, Johnny van Doorn, will bring out the connection between the strategies of performance and the staging of literary conventions.

### 3. The Holy Hypocrite: Johnny van Doorn as Case Study

During his lifetime Van Doorn published two poetry collections: *Een nieuwe mongool (Post-Sexuele ZondagsPoëzie)* (1966) ['A New Mongol (Post-Sexual Sunday Poetry)'] and *De heilige huichelaar* (1968) ['The Holy Hypocrite']. His *Verzamelde gedichten* ['Collected poems'] appeared in 1994, three years after his death. Studying the work of a performance poet by analyzing his written poetry is not unproblematic as it does not take into account the actual physical realization of the poems (Middleton, "How to Read": 13'; Pfeiler 29). Van Doorn himself questioned the validity of such an approach: "My own poetry on paper, put into words, has always struck me as something very unpleasant; I have always related [my poems] to my *acts*." (Dütting 15)<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, it is possible and useful to analyze Van Doorn's work as a form of "new oral poetry," which

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<sup>24</sup> "M'n eigen poëzie, op papier, in woorden overgebracht, doet mij bijzonder onprettig aan, ik heb ze altijd in verband gebracht met mijn *acts*."

George Economou defines as

poetic work made specifically, but obviously in varying degrees, with an awareness of a *live* audience to whom the work could be read aloud, or of a reader-audience who could interpret that poetry in print in such a way as to approximate in the mind's ear an oral performance of it in any voice the reader-audience chooses but ideally in the voice of the poet him/herself. (654)

Admittedly, an interpretation of Van Doorn's work as new oral poetry ignores the fact that that any poetry reading is "irreducibly singular and historical" (Middleton, "How to Read" 17), yet such an approach has its merits: it can shed light on the performance strategies implicit in his work and explain why it should be analyzed in terms of a staging of traditional poetry conventions. In the following sections, I will analyze Van Doorn's actual performance praxis only where it is relevant to my argument.

Van Doorn was well aware that his performances were at odds with the literary mainstream of the 1960s: as he states, "My poems lie outside of the ossified little street of what used to be literature" (Keuning 80).<sup>25</sup> In his literary work, he structurally frustrates the expectations of his readers and audience in his poetry and in his performances. At first glance he does not seem to deviate from the conventional assumption that a central and centered poetic persona is speaking in the poem. Almost without exceptions his poems consist of a single long sentence, divided over many extremely short verse lines. The imagery is immediately recognizable as his since Van Doorn has a preference for the grotesque, combining explicitly sexual and violent images with religious and sentimental motives. Furthermore, he constantly stresses the uniqueness and the strength of his voice: he presents himself as "The Big Voice of Arnhem," "the greatest singer of my time," "accurately [firing]" his "blood-curdling scream" and sending his "hypnotic commands into stereophonic space" (Van Doorn 36, 89, 50, 91).<sup>26</sup> Finally, the distinctiveness of his oeuvre is paralleled by his incomparable diction, at first slow and solemn, towards the end of a performance fast, wheezy and stuttering. In short, both on paper and on stage, Van Doorn pretends to put forward a well-defined poetic persona with an authentic voice.

Upon closer analysis, however, the identity of the central persona turns out to be impossible to ascertain. Van Doorn not only admitted to operating under a variety of pen names, including Johnny the SelfKicker, Electric Goebbels, Electric Jesus, Electricity Jesus, and John Jesus Electric, but he also aimed at a transgression of the limits of the self and craved an "ecstatic bliss" and an "absence of ego" (Van Doorn 16, 197).<sup>27</sup> In addition to this, he created confusion by introducing various points of view in his poems. The central character and speaker in *Een nieuwe mongool* is identified with the poet himself. In *De heilige huichelaar*, the main character of the 'Holy Hypocrite' is identified as "Johnny the SelfKicker" (Van Doorn 173), but he is portrayed in the third person by an unnamed 'I' or 'we'—and in an interview, Van Doorn claimed to be "the disciple" of the Holy Hypocrite

<sup>25</sup> "Mijn gedichten liggen buiten het verkalkte straatje van de vroegere literatuur."

<sup>26</sup> "grootste zanger / Van mijn tijd"; "Akkuraat vuur ik / Een ijselijke gil"; "Met mijn hypnotiserende / Bevelen stereofonisch / De ruimte in."

<sup>27</sup> "Extatische / Verrukking"; "de / Afwezigheid van ego."

(Herbergs). The pen name 'The SelfKicker' in itself is revealing in this context, even more so when it is used, as in *De heilige huichelaar*, to refer to someone other than the speaker in the poems.

Furthermore, Van Doorn's obsession with other forms of transgression such as eroticism, violence and drug abuse reveals a longing for self-annihilation as well. During his performances, he would often scream himself into a trance-like state, with or without the help of drugs. Admittedly, Van Doorn's biographer Nico Keuning points out that the poet often exaggerated his stories about drug experiments: the poet "plays with his decadent image, exaggerates, and enjoys frightening people with his stories" (Keuning 51).<sup>28</sup> Yet even if Van Doorn was not under the influence of drugs when performing, it was clear that his performances often ended in self-loss and ecstasy. One person present at a performance in 1962 described this process in detail:

He coils up on the table, says in a disgusting way *aaah* to the unlucky artist in front of the table [...], carries out daredevil feats, while he is anxiously supported by the helping hands of his followers; [...] in between there are some carefully memorized refrains, which do contain some beautifully recited phrases, and sometimes very erotic to anti-erotic exclamations too.  
(Dütting 22)<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting on his performance in 'Poëzie in Carré', Van Doorn writes: "At such a moment you are a different being, something that separates itself from your own person" (Dütting 68).<sup>30</sup>

By frustrating the reader's expectation of encountering a well-defined subject in a poem, Van Doorn breaks with one of the central laws of the tradition of declamation: the need for self-mastery. In fact, Van Doorn is aiming for the opposite. He describes his infamous "self kick" as "the moment that I control what is not controlled," and he adds: "Yet in a completely different manner than an actor or theatre performer would envision that" (Dütting 15).<sup>31</sup> He sees himself as the "personification" of "Anti-Theatre" and models his performance style on "Artaud's Thea- / Tre of Cruelty" (Van Doorn 77, 173).<sup>32</sup> This explains why he continuously criticizes Dutch drama schools, for declamation and traditionalist dramaturgy were still the norm at such institutes during the first half of the sixties (Van Engen 752-59). In one particular poem, he vehemently criticizes the "caste of artists" consisting of the "conventional / Actors (for whom still exist / To my greatest surprise / Academies) (Van Doorn 87);" and another poem ends as follows:

<sup>28</sup> "speelt met dat verdorven image, overdrijft, en geniet ervan met zijn uitspraken mensen angst aan te jagen."

<sup>29</sup> "Hij kruipt ineen op de tafel, zegt op een walgelijke manier 'aaaa' tegen de ongelukkige kunstenaar die vlak voor de tafel zit [...], voert halsbrekende stuiptrekkingen uit, hierbij angstvallig ondersteund door de behulpzame handen zijner volgelingen; [...] met daartussen enkele zorgvuldig gememoriseerde refreinen, waarin wel enkele mooi voorgedragen frasen, en soms ook wel erg erotische tot anti-erotische uitroepingen."

<sup>30</sup> "Op zo'n moment ben je een ander wezen, een afsplitsing van je eigen persoon."

<sup>31</sup> "Het moment dat ik de niet-beheersing beheers. Maar dan geheel anders dan een acteur of toneelspeler zich dat voorstelt."

<sup>32</sup> "the Anti-Theatre (waarvan hij al / Jarenlang de personificatie is)"; "Gelijk Artauds Thea- / Ter Van De Wreedheid."

With a horrible  
 Raising of my voice  
 I demand the ex-  
 Tradition of a number of  
 Prominent  
 Theatre educators  
 (The main target  
 Being the principal): (Van Doorn 49) <sup>33</sup>

Keuning offers a biographical explanation for Van Doorn's criticisms when he reminds us that the poet was rejected by the academy of dramatic art (Keuning 39). But Van Doorn's critique of the formality of Dutch traditional theatre is not merely a personal matter; it also has a programmatic value. It is significant in this connection that Van Doorn came to perform his electric acts at the Carré Theatre. Carré is one of the most important stages in Dutch theatre, where many popular cabaret, theatre and revue shows premiered in the 1960s. This added a new layer of meaning to Van Doorn's performance, for by participating to 'Poëzie in Carré,' he braved the lion of traditional bourgeois entertainment in its den. The flower bashing that he had to suffer at the end of his performance is therefore quite ironic: the bouquet, that traditionally expressed the gratitude of the audience for the actor's controlled display of mastery, now became a means to signify the audience's disapproval of Van Doorn's ecstatic improvisations. The location, the flowers and the bashing, in other words, turned out to be meaningful elements of the performance, which contributed significantly to the staging of poeticity.

So far, it has become clear that the poetic persona in Van Doorn's poetry is shifting, unreliable, and problematic. On the one hand, a single subject with an authentic voice seems to manifest itself; on the other hand, the poet thwarts identification, undermines the stability of the self, and distances himself from the rigid and restraining style of declamatory (theatre) performances.

Not only the role of the persona in Van Doorn's work and poetics is challenging. He also opposes the idea that a poem should be an organic whole, a well-thought out structure in which every element is meaningful. This is obvious in his written poetry, in which he favors random line breaks, nonsensical punctuation and open endings. Typical line breaks for Van Doorn are, for example, "concentra- / Tioncamp," "ru- / Ral," "cine- / Mas" (Van Doorn 15, 28, 144).<sup>34</sup> No metric, syllabic or logical reason for these line breaks can be discerned. Furthermore, Van Doorn indulges in idiosyncratic punctuation: numerous lines end with '&' or ': -'. One poem even ends with the lines: "Dream freely [...] / Of kidney level- / Ing & // &?" The title of the next poem is '&?' and continues the narrative (Van Doorn 52-53).<sup>35</sup> In the poem quoted earlier, Van Doorn undercuts the self-sufficiency of the poem by cutting the thread of the narrative drastically: after the

<sup>33</sup> "de achtergebleven / Kunstenaarskaste: / De conventionele / Akteurs (waarvoor tot / Mijn grote verbazing / Nog steeds Akademies / Bestaan)"; "Met gruwelijke / Stemverheffing / Eis ik de uit- / Levering van enkele / Vooraanstaande / Toneelpedagogen / (Met als hoofddoel / De directeur):"

<sup>34</sup> "concentra- / Tiekamp"; "lan- / Delijk"; "cine- / Maas."

<sup>35</sup> "Droom vrijuit / [...] / Over nierspieve- / Lingen & // &?"

lines “With a horrible / Raising of my voice” the poem ends with a colon, but the poem following is no way related to it. Van Doorn’s verse technique thus blurs the traditional boundaries of the (single) poem.

On a more thematic level, the disrespect for the convention of coherence is abundantly demonstrated and sometimes even explicitly addressed. This is clear in two particularly interesting poems. The first, ‘Misunderstanding about scene such and such’, starts with the description of an orgy (Van Doorn 54-55).<sup>36</sup> Then, the poet breaks into a torrent of words, followed by the observation that two “Calvinists downstairs” are planning a murder, and ends with a scene in which a landlady stumbles upon the orgy. The connection between these thematic lines is hard to identify, and the title of the poem (‘scene such and such’) implies that the poem consists of random scenes. In another poem, entitled ‘Result of a working day’, Van Doorn ridicules the expectation of coherence by explicitly pointing out that even the poet does not know whether there is a meaningful connection between the elements of his poem ‘Result of a working day (Resultaat van een werkdag)’:

Much taken up with  
Talking a TV pastor  
Who speaks the epilogue  
three times a week  
Into a suicide attempt &  
Dutch viewers look  
Surprised when  
After a murmured Amen  
He shoots a bullet  
Into his throat  
With a double-barreled gun:  
Short-winded I receive  
During the arisen fit of laughter  
A masturbatory vision  
Of a high-strung  
Rubber planter in the  
Matto Grosso &  
Nervously I search  
For the connection... (Van Doorn 1994:64)<sup>37</sup>

Although is possible to perceive a certain “connection” between the scenes—a common insistence on religion, violence, sex and absurdity—it is telling that the ‘I’ himself is unsure about the relationship between the events he describes. As a consequence, the

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Misvatting omtrent scene zoveel.’

<sup>37</sup> “Resultaat van een werkdag // Druk in de weer met / Het inpraten van een / Zelfmoordpoging aan / Een 3maal in de week / TVdagsluitende dominee & / Kijkend Nederland kijkt / Verrast op als hij / Na een gepreveld Amen / Met een dubbelloops / Pistool een kogel / Z’n keel inschiet: / Aamborstig krijg ik / In de ontstane lachstuij / Een onanatievisioen / Van een fijnbesnaarde / Rubberplanter in de / Matto Grosso door & / Zenuwachtig zoek ik / Naar het verband...”

reader will doubt whether there is any connection at all. Clearly, coherence is far from self-evident in Van Doorn's work.

The third and final expectation of poetry identified above is that of significance: it is assumed that the poet is serious about his work and that his poems contain some form of exceptional knowledge. Van Doorn refuses to meet this expectation. He poses as a prophet, even as a messiah, yet at the same time as the "ParanoiaMan" with a "psychopathic mask," or as "a quite common labourer / a preposterous poetry manufacturer / That hacks away at it with a bloody axe / Unsubtle and full of ran- / Cour." Van Doorn warns his readers: "Our poet" is a "miraculous / Mixture of / Criss-crossing / Inconsequences, / Worlds, / Opinions & / Unshakable / Facts" (Van Doorn 81, 175, 197, 201).<sup>38</sup> The figure of the 'Holy Hypocrite' unites these characteristics. The holy hypocrite reveals the truth; however, being hypocritical, he distorts it at the same time. "I am a poseur and an imposter. And I know it," Van Doorn confessed in an interview, and on several other occasions he claimed that he had "nothing to do with literature" (Herbergs; Dütting 39).<sup>39</sup> In light of such statements the reader will no doubt find it difficult to take Van Doorn seriously. After all, how trustworthy is a poet who starts one of his poems with the German lines "Wir Sind Serioes Nicht-Serioes In / Unseren Manifestationen Und / Das Ist Richtig" ['We Are Seriously Not-Serious In / Our Manifestations And / That is Right'] (Van Doorn 171)?

The embrace of insincerity is an important strategy for Van Doorn. He makes use of it in his poetics as well. His comments on his work and literary opinions are often contradictory and it is nearly impossible to pin him down on a statement. In an interview, for example, he stated: "You could say that my work is pervaded with a latently present moralistic spirit, [...]. I really do propagate a message. It's a form of protest poetry, really." Two years later, he seemed to have changed his mind: "Protest. Disgusting. I am not doing anything, really. I am just an imposter" (Dütting 24, 32).<sup>40</sup> Van Doorn displayed the same obstructive attitude when one interviewer called him a "pop or a performance poet": "Wait a minute, listen," he responded, "I am just an old-fashioned declamatory artist, a declaimer. Not a performer, because that always makes me think of something American that is by now out-dated." (Dütting 106)<sup>41</sup> It is too simplistic to assume that Van Doorn had an unstable personality; it is more appropriate to argue that he is playing with the traditional notion that a poet ought to have a clear-cut and consistent literary program. Unlike many of his fellow poets, this performer does not want to use language seriously, sincerely and efficiently to convey a profound insight. Quite to the contrary: he flouts the convention of significance, both in his 'seriously unserious' poetry and in his apparently incoherent poetics.

<sup>38</sup> "ParanoiaMan"; "Psychopatich masker"; "doodgewoon een werkmán, / Een potsierlijke poëziefabrikant / Die ongenueanceerd en ranku- / Neus er met bebloede / Bijl op inhakt"; "Dat onze dichter / Een wonderlijk / Mengsel is van / Kriskras door- / Elkaarlopende / Inkonsekwenties, / Werelden, / Meningen & / Onwrikbare / Feiten."

<sup>39</sup> "Ik ben een aansteller en een oplichter. En ik weet het"; "dat ik [...] niets met literatuur te maken heb."

<sup>40</sup> "Je zou kunnen zeggen, dat mijn werk een latent moralistische geest ademt, zoals ook satire en de sick joke in feite moralistisch zijn. Ik draag wel degelijk een boodschap uit. Het is eigenlijk een soort protestpoëzie"; "Protest. Weerzinwekkend. Ik doe gewoon nergens aan. Ik ben gewoon een oplichter."

<sup>41</sup> "Ja, hoor eens [...], ik ben gewoon een ouderwets voordrachtskunstenaar. Een declamator. Geen performer, want daarbij moet ik altijd denken aan iets Amerikaans dat al lang gedateerd is."

We have seen that Van Doorn's work conflicts with all three main critical assumptions on poetry: it dismantles the poetic persona, disregards the need for coherence, and explicitly states that the poet does not have a serious message to convey. Not only does this poet break with these conventions; he also tauntingly appropriates them. "By being extremely traditional," he believed, "you can make something look extremely ridiculous" (Keuning 91).<sup>42</sup> He is, in his own words, 'overdoing' the traditional conventions: "The form that I am using is always *overdone*. I am always too much of a good thing. That is precisely what I like, transgressing things, making mistakes, to make sure that things misfire constantly" (qtd. in Dütting 32-33).<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Van Doorn not only exaggerated the traditional conventions of poetry and performance; he also overdid the elements that are at odds with them. On stage, for instance, he would emphasize his tendency to stutter. "I may stutter, I speak in a hoarse voice, but I don't hide it," he once confessed. "Those are things that I push to the fore. Things that make a personality enormous" (Keuning 77).<sup>44</sup> His overstrained and stammering performance style, which foregrounded the uncontrollable, inefficient and bodily aspects of language, can be said to challenge once more what Craig Dworkin has identified as "the ideologies of normalcy, fluency, transparently communicative expository eloquence" (Dworkin 182-183).

Both Van Doorn's 'overdoing' of – as well as his exaggerated attack on – traditional poetic conceptions thus turns his poetry into a 'performance' of them. His poems and acts 'stage' the limits of literary criticism. Derek Attridge argues that such a staging occurs when a literary work "fails to answer to our habitual needs in processing language." Consequently, it presents itself as "simultaneously familiar and other" and puts us under the obligation "to attend scrupulously, to suspend as far as we can our usual assumptions and practices, to translate the work into our terms while remaining aware of the necessary betrayal that this involves" (Attridge 120). Middleton, too, stresses that a performance

sometimes exceeds existing explanations of its functioning and significance, and this excess provides one of the main reasons for the continuing success of readings: the performance of the poem compels recognition of the limits of our understanding of language. (*Distant* 72)

Van Doorn's performances exceed the "limits of our understanding" of poetry, which considers the poetic persona, coherence and significance as necessary conditions for a text to be experienced as 'poetic.' The poetry of Van Doorn explicitly and implicitly engages with these conventional assumptions about poetry and its performance, exploits them, and explores new poetic possibilities. As a consequence, it poses a challenge to critics and literary scholars: it compels them to reflect on, and depart from, their critical premises.

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<sup>42</sup> "Door supertraditioneel te zijn kun je de zaak bijvoorbeeld enorm in het belachelijke trekken."

<sup>43</sup> "De vorm die ik gebruik, is altijd *overdone*. Ik ben voortdurend te veel van het goede. Ik hou juist van dingen overtreden, fouten maken, zodat dingen, voortdurend de mist ingaan."

<sup>44</sup> "Ik stotter misschien, ik praat hees, maar ik verdoezel dat niet. Het zijn juist de dingen die ik naar voren push. Die een persoonlijkheid enorm groot maken."

#### 4. Conclusion: A Performative Reading of Performance Poetry

This analysis of Van Doorn's work has several implications for the study of performance poetry in general. It sheds new light on the critical deadlock between Dutch literary criticism and performance poetry, which has been in place since the sixties, because it demonstrates that performers such as Van Doorn reveal and enact a specific cultural politics. Contrary to what Vaessens suggest, they do enter into dialogue with literary traditions. They appropriate canonical traditions and draw the attention to those forms of art which *cannot* be appreciated by literary critics, due to the limits of their mode of criticism. Nonetheless, these performers do appeal to conventions and strategies that ought to be very familiar to most professional critics. Their performance practice is a useful point of departure for critical analysis, provided that the reviewer or scholar is willing to reflect on his aesthetic assumptions and critical limits. A critical debate between performers and critics, then, becomes possible. This is of great importance for the contemporary Dutch performance scene, for there is a range of, until now, critically unnoticed performers who operate in the wake of Van Doorn's experiments, among them Sieger Baljon, Didi de Paris, ACG Vianen and Peter Holvoet Hansen (Franssen 2008: 263-67).

This case study of Van Doorn's poetry practice also refutes Mourits' suggestion that performance poetry stays clear of ambiguity (338). While many contemporary performing poets do strive for a largely unproblematic intelligibility (such as Hagar Peeters, Ingmar Heytze, Erik Jan Harmens or Bart F.M. Droog), Van Doorn's subversive relation to the literary tradition and his ambivalent stance towards his own poetics prove that not all poets are aiming for comprehensibility. Today, performers such as Bernhard Christiansen, Tsead Bruinja or Jaap Blonk continue in his footsteps: they embrace experiments and favor ambiguity.

Finally, the case of Van Doorn shows that performance poetry can be understood as a staging of poeticity. As a poetic phenomenon it reveals and transgresses the interpretive and aesthetic limits of literary criticism. This explains why the critics of Van Doorn found it difficult to evaluate his work. The same holds true for contemporary critics, such as Vergeer and Gerbrandy. Their rejection of certain performance poets because those poets are "aiming at effect," or because they do not handle language "efficiently," indicates that these critics adhere to a critical tradition that prefers reticence and efficiency to exaggeration and transgression.

The examination of Van Doorn's acts and poems that is put forward in this article seeks to forge a type of literary analysis that acknowledges the limits of traditional criticism and can overcome the deadlock between performance poetry and literary criticism. This mode of literary analysis has been described as a "performative" or "creative" reading. It is a "singular putting into play of—while also testing and transforming—the set of codes and conventions that make up the institution of literature and the wider cultural formation of which it is part." (Attridge 105-106) Such an interpretive mode is a performance in itself. Performative reading can cure the poetry critic of his stage fright, for it invites him to come to terms with his limited focus on

formalist, textual forms of literature, and it can release the performer of his text anxiety, for it acknowledges the singular and transgressive nature of his work.

A performative approach to performance poetry is all the more needed, since the latter seems to be a form of literature that constitutes a structural transgression. The staging of poeticity that occurred at 'Poëzie in Carré' was not a one-time event, a non-reproducible reaction against one particular instant of cultural politics: as the institution of literature changes, performance, continually transgressing its limits, changes with it. An intriguing illustration of this ongoing dynamic is that the new mode of performance criticism that has been developed within the Dutch slam scene appears now to be challenged by the recent work of a number of Dutch performers. Simon Mulder for one, has made a name for himself at several poetry slams by traditionally declaiming dark romantic sonnets, and has aroused much discussion on where the limits of performance poetry and its criticism are to be drawn (Franssen 2009: 241). It seems that he and others practice a new staging of poeticity that questions the currently dominant views on performance poetry.

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