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THE REFERENCE IN CONTEMPORARY POETIC PERFORMANCE  
(on the example of verses by George Mpange and Arseniy Molchanov)

During my training as a language teacher, I was told to remember the volume of the short-term memory and not to exceed the *seven plus or minus two* formula while giving portions of new vocabulary. The long-term memory is supposed to hold much more, but how much has not been defined exactly, since it is a very individual characteristic. However, the scientists say that we become less capable

to memorize things. Such is the consequence of living in the world overloaded with information. Today there's too much information too easily available at any time. We are faced with the challenge to systematize this unfathomable knowledge, to create the base for it to rest on. But our brain refuses to memorize anything which is a click away, it doesn't recognize the necessity of making efforts to remember.

Such reality can't but have impact on the data themselves: on the texts and on certain literary genres. They have to change to be perceived, noticed, read or rather watched. This primarily concerns small literary forms, poetry in particular. Poetic tradition is currently undergoing numerous transformations. They started in the previous century, and poetry moved from rhyme to no rhyme or to approximate rhyme. The meter is becoming less regular. We have got accustomed to graphic experiments such as absence of capital letters and curious forms of the poem itself on paper.

One of the transformations of today is that poetry moves off paper online. A. Kurpatov, Scientific Director of Sberbank's Laboratory of Neuroscience and Human Behavior, speaking in January 2020 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, stated the fact that we are gradually moving from Gutenberg galaxy to Zuckerberg galaxy [1].

Letting alone many possible interpretations of his statement, let's focus on one of them: we are moving from printed knowledge introduced with the beginning of the printing era back to oral presentation of knowledge. From printed texts we pass to audio and visual performances of the spoken word. They just have more chances of attracting our spoiled mind and of capturing our attention. So, many of the poets of the twenty first century keep their texts in social media. Or, they exhibit their art as performances on YouTube channels.

This is one of the features of today's poetic texts. The second feature is that their reference, their subject matter is often as fast changing as the reality itself. Third, their structure is many-faceted: words, music, gestures of the performer, they are not just texts on the page.

One of the representatives of this tradition is George Mpanga, whose stage name is George the Poet. Born in London to Ugandan parents, George Mpanga started with performing rap and grimy music. Later, attending Queen Elizabeth's School in Barnet, and then at King's College, Cambridge he widened his genre and went into performing musical poetry. Musical poetry, according to his own words attracts wider audience while rap has a number genre, style and language limitations.

When at school he saw himself as a future entertainer. He has become one, but the subject of many of his so to speak entertaining poems remains serious: social and cultural contrasts of his country and its capital. Here is, for example, the poem entitled *Go Home*:

*I wonder how much compassion you'll hear in a country where the leaders spread irrational fear. It's discouraging if not depressing to learn that a witch-hunt is now our most pressing concern. To keep those Jonnies on their feet, all the*

*stations need Border Agency Bobbies on the beat. Be sure and make the scene loud and clear... Because they should be out of here. "Go home" all over lorries on the street? That's Government's best suggestion? Well, such a subversive approach must be entirely necessary. Which begs the question:*

*How many illegal immigrants are there in this country?*

*Oh, you don't quite know. So, how can you justify the psychological impact of this whole sideshow? Like race relations' disintegration, this is either oversight or misinformation. But control's about taking sides, so it's no surprise you want to roll this out nationwide.*

*"Go Home" harks back to a miserable memory of hatred towards an invisible enemy, and it's wrong of Government to use this phrase, it's wrong of Government to abuse its place, because language is a gateway to an attitude – that's menacing, that's hostile, that is rude. In using those words you invite the behaviour that comes with them. And in doing so, you validate the bigot that runs with them. This is kiddish, it's foolish, it's not British – it's brutish. No one in the country knows how many illegal immigrants there are. Ninety-four percent of the country know that a lot of immigrants don't look like them.*

*If Government can't be bothered to tread carefully, why should anyone else?*

[2]

When speaking about immigration, G. Mpanga mentions several details which need to be clarified for the full understanding of the poem. For example, "Go home!", "All over lorries on the street" refers to Theresa May's campaign against illegal immigration, held in 2013. "Go home or face arrest" are van advertisements [3]. Or border agency bobbies – policemen on the foot patrol, the nickname can be traced back to Sir Robert [Bobby] Peel who established the Metropolitan police force in 1830 in London. These facts contribute to the understanding, but even without them his followers worldwide would get the sense.

The text looks like prose rather than poetry. The rhythm of the poem is not regular. Starting with "I wonder" – a perfect example of the amphibrach, he doesn't keep to this structure, breaking it quite often.

The rhymes, however, can be traced in this musical poem, quite a number of them. *Fear-hear – loud and clear – out of here; best suggestion – that begs the question; don't quite know – this whole slideshow; disintegration – misinformation; taking sides – surprise – nationwide; the behaviour that comes with them – the bigot that runs with them; kiddish – foolish – British – brutish.*

The semantics of accented words brings forward associations with children who are in the way of adults (*go home, make the scene loud and clear, should be out of here*), inefficiency (*slideshow*), bigotry and double standards (*the bigot that runs with them*), cruelty, injustice (*hostile, not british, brutish*). The poet accuses the Government of tactless and inhuman approach to the problem.

His poem *My City* [4], one of the performances with which he came to prominence, depicts London as a mecca for those looking for a better life: *The Sun could be down on his hungry town but in London he found him a shot at greatness.*

The vocabulary, as well as the images of this poem, falls into the bright and the gloomy, representing all kinds of states of mind, streets and corners.

The dark aspect can be represented by the following: *...that's how Londoners are from time to time // Only got the time to grind and whine; I grew up around lots of crime, the violent kind; It's not just Cockney rhyming slang, we've got block-beef, violent gangs; Awkward interactions which most don't force // Children navigating through postcode wars.*

And the contrary: *Witness economy blooming for the have-a-lots: // Business is gonna be booming in a tax system where the more rich get more rich; the hype and shine.*

These contrasting images are so interwoven that there are few lines referring solely to the misery or vice versa prosperity.

G. Mpanga introduces some specific aspects of London life understood by those who live there or those who visited and experienced this. These are the references to the transportation system: *TFL knows the world is your Oyster as long as you can afford it.*

TFL, or *Transport for London* is a government body responsible for London's network of principal road routes. Devoid of its original Shakespearean violent connotation the expression "the world is your oyster" refers not only to the world open to you, but also to London payment method, to the oyster card used in public transport system. "As long as you can afford it" is added casually and questions the accessibility and availability of adventure to everyone who possesses the spirit of adventure. For the world to be your oyster you need as well to be able to afford it.

The *postcode wars* based on what area, i.e. what stratum you represent are familiar to capital city inhabitants.

The author loves his city, he has driven and walked its various districts: "Even though you might need to re-mortgage just to get from Aldwych to Shoreditch..." and sympathizes first and foremost with those who are "watching from the sidelines", who don't have the "front row seat". After all, they are as capable of swapping a nicety with you as their more privileged counterparts.

*And join us in moving along to the groove of the song*

*What a sight to see, we could swap a nicety*

*Some of us feel you've forgotten my city*

*But hopefully you'll be proving us wrong*

*If you can **take the rough with the smooth** then it's on.*

There are examples of playing with phraseological units and set-expressions. These expressions are like tourist-oriented images of London, shining on postcards. We have grown with their ready-made meanings in our heads. Taking the rough with the smooth is one of them – paying attention to less polished things and people, visiting non-tourist areas, including their inhabitants into fairer social interactions. Because they deserve it, they are, after all, part of the cultural and linguistic diversity, but "we // learnt to despise the strife and // Forgot that *variety's the spice of life* – look around you".

An invaluable accompaniment to the text is the YouTube movie where George the Poet performs his monologue about London [5]. There you can actually see the many faces of London as George the Poet is wandering through its forgotten parts reciting his poem.

Both the poems *Go Home* and *My City* would echo the experiences of those who are “*navigating through postcode wars*”. However, the author’s talent as an entertainer has won poem *My City* more than 180 thousand views and may as well attract just those who love the rhythm of the spoken word.

Similarly, the Russian poet Arseniy Molchanov acknowledges the necessity of any poem to sound, its right to be voiced. He is the founder of the so-called *LitPons* – literary Mondays [*literaturnyi ponedel'nik*]. These are rendez-vous for reciting poetry, organized for some to be heard and for others to enjoy the performance. Modern Russia is no longer the USSR of the sixties where certain poets enjoyed the circulation of millions of copies of their books. Yet, there is hunger for poeticizing reality, for its artistic description, this hunger is proportionate to the toughness of the reality.

If editors unwillingly publish poetry – low are the chances of it becoming a bestseller – internet sites and special events have filled this gap and have become venues for poetic self-expression.

A. Molchanov himself works in syllabotonic versification. His stage name is *Ars-Pegas*, *ars* meaning *arts* in Latin and *Pegas* being the Russian for *Pegasus*. The most of his poetry is available online on his page on *stihi.ru* [6]. His meter and structure remaining relatively loyal to traditions, the subject-matter of his poems is flexible, sometimes intangible, in some cases easily recognizable today, but will it be as easily understood tomorrow? Whatever the theme of the poem is, his omnipresent character is the Internet and all sorts of changes and objects brought into our life by digitalization.

A perfect representation of this is his poem “*Зафоловь*”. The title can be translated as “*Follow Me*” [e.g., on Twitter]:

*Зафоловь*  
*появилась новая рифма к слову любовь,*  
*напиши ты скорее об этом в жж,*  
*зафоловь меня в твиттере ты, зафоловь,*  
*потому что тебя я зафоловил уже,*  
*поставь тонну лайков скорее, поставь,*  
*сердцебиение – просто клик,*  
*я запутался, правда, где сон, а где явь*  
*и великий могучий русский язык [7].*

To lovers of Russian classical poetic traditions of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries this poem may seem to be unserious playing around not worthy of choosing it a subject for the article. The thing is – the author treads carefully, balancing on the verge of sincerity and parody. His touch of self-irony prevents me from discarding this poem as pure hooliganism. On the contrary, to me it’s a strong and concise description of our life in the world of digitalization. Comparing

heartbeat to a click brings to our minds all the social media where we take pains to position ourselves so as to produce a favourable impression. We need our likes, our grooming (“*поставь тонну лайков скорее, поставь,*” – *give me a ton of likes*) just as pupils in primary schools need approval of their teacher, and we avidly check for likes any tweet or a photo we have posted. Isn't our heartbeat a click each time we surf through dating sites? The click itself stands for the sound of the mouse, but with today's sensor screens we don't even need to click. Consequently, we might lose the word in the future. The verb *зафоловь*, *фоловить* is a neologism in Russian. This loan word refers to following someone's online activity and can hardly be used in other contexts. Ironically, its imperative mood rhymes with the Russian equivalent of *love* – *любовь*. Wondering about how the Russian language reflects new internet-realia, Ars-Pegas gives a casual hint about the problem which is now a field of research for many scientists, where there are even bestsellers, e.g., the study made by M. Krongauz [8].

In his poem Ars-Pegas refers as well to Twitter and Livejournal (“*ЖЖ*”). Everyone still knows Twitter, but Livejournal's popularity has declined with the development of clip mentality and loss of interest for longreads. It has given in to Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat.

Digital world associations accompany his lyrical speaker in the poem “*Неси*” [Carry Me] in the first and the fifth line: “*Я так люблю наш трепет на рените...*” [9]. “*На рените*” [on repeat] refers here not to repeating soundtrack in your smartphone but to human feelings and sensations experienced over and over. The virtual reality overlaps the actual reality, and the language which is supposed to refer to the virtual reality penetrates the description of the speaker's relationship.

A sort of drama is unfolding in the poem “*Ретвит нашего времени*” [A Retweet of Our Time]. It reflects the modern tendency to insult people for their posts because we feel protected, unseen and undiscovered in our warm and cosy world behind the screen. The likes and retweets are in such cases perceived as a surrogate of love and protection. The last stanza sounds like a parody where imploring to receive likes echoes the longing for love in old verses:

*Так лайков я молил твоих,  
Хотя бы одного ретвита!...  
И сей печальный скорбный стих –  
Последний пост в жж пиита* [10].

Yet, even separated by kilometers, time zones and walls we are all vulnerable to negative comments, when they are targeted at us. And yes, we do need our portion of likes.

Molchanov's second global, omnipresent and profoundly loved character is Moscow. Moscow lives in his every third if not in every other poem. He mentions its metro stations so many times that it's possible to create a map. Unlike G. Mpanga in whose lines we feel longing for fairer life for Londoners, A. Molchanov, or Ars-Pegas doesn't demand anything of his city. He lives with it, is doomed to it, he and his Moscow observe one another's life journey.



He directly addresses Moscow in the poem “Сгораешь” [You are Burning] referring to the abnormal heat of 2010, burning forests around the capital and the smog surrounding it. The poet recalls the events in history where cities ended up in physical or political destruction: Sodom and Gomorrah, Roman Empire, the Plagues of Egypt. The last lines where he acknowledges Moscow’s right to be burning may refer to the fire of Moscow in 1812, during the invasion of Napoleon’s army when the citizens set their town on fire deliberately:

*я люблю тебя, не о дыме,  
я пишу, дорогая Москва,  
и пускай ты сгораешь с другими –  
в этот раз ты, наверно, права.[11]*

In one of the latest poems “То ли” Moscow briefly flashes its signboards with the names of restaurants on them, the rest of the poem being an attempt to define the speaker’s life and identity:

*У меня – «Планета Суши»,  
У тебя – «Маки-Маки»,  
Мы не стали лучше –  
Бутовские собаки.  
То ли псы, то ли поэты –  
То ли «all inclusive»,  
То ли выкрики ветра,  
То ли шарики в лузе,  
Уловимы едва ли –  
И еле слышны –  
То ли пьянка в подвале,  
То ли поминки на крыше.[12]*

How eclectic this identity is can be traced from the images: stray dogs of Butovo (a district in Moscow), billiards balls in the pocket, a cliché “all inclusive”, cries of the wind, a bender in the basement, a wake on the roof. The images are as inconsistent and incoherent as modern reality with tons of information on the serving plate. The reality is that these poets are trying to be in tune with in their way of communicating messages, and in their rhythm and beat and in choosing fragmented, flowing and pulsating subjects.

## REFERENCE LIST

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