Joanna Roś
Uniwersytet Warszawski

*The Night* by Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine.

Some reflections on American punk poems.

There is punk poetry and junk poetry
There is monk poetry and drunk poetry
There is sad poetry and mad poetry
But above all there is good poetry
And there is bad poetry

(Carner, 1999, a quote from a poem by Mahmood Jamal, p. 21)

**Searching for punk poetry**

Punk poetry, as a literary form created by musicians or persons closely associated with the punk music scene, may seem for researchers of culture or literature to be a somewhat vague, or at least paradoxical concept, and thus not worthy of much attention. Although language is constantly located in the very center of punk’s explosion of expression, the idea of punk poetry, in a stereotypical view, is limited to the image of young people “shouting insults at their listeners and even spitting at them”, as English writer Anthony Daniels summed it up in 1987 (Daniels, 1987, p.17), suggesting that their principles were to be offensive and get attention at all cost. There is also a conviction that punk poetry does not translate too well into the printed form, as it is just a turbulent, frenzied delivery of those poems that draws the attention of their recipients. In his newly published book *Cool Characters*, Lee Konstantinou,
an assistant professor of English Literature at the University of Maryland, notices (for the first time in the history of literary and cultural studies with such clarity) that, indeed, for a long time literary scholars have linked punk with the Poetry Project at St. Mark Church in-the-Bowery in the United States and have written about the literary ambitions of performers such as Patti Smith, but their interests have oscillated around the attempts of punk poets to break the distance existing between audience and artist, while treating the literary dimension of punk as less important, subordinate to the music dimension (Konstantinou, 2016, p. 23-24). Following the steps of Konstantinou who, claiming that punk using irony and linguistic polysemy to obtain entrance to a supposed area of independence outside of language and signification is “at least as much a literary as a musical or subcultural phenomenon”, delineated punk’s style of irony based on the study of Kathy Acker and William S. Burrough’s output (Konstantinou, 2016, p. 23), I will try to summarize the point of early American punk poetry, both its cultural background and literary features, expecting that in the future joined efforts of enthusiasts of this type of creativity will contribute to and foster the emergence of an extensive research work on the appearance of that type of literature. My simple assumption is that if something like “American punk poetry” does in fact exists, it should, for sure, be findable somewhere in the forgotten, never republished books of the seventies, thus also in the poems included in The Night, the poetic collaboration of Tom Verlaine and Patti Smith (Smith, Verlaine, 1976), whose analysis presented in this article, I hope, will provide promising findings. The present text is especially inspired by the number of substantial publications in book and article form by academic researchers, which the past several years have brought about, concerning the intersections between high and low culture in literature, music and film in the twentieth century, debating over the hypothesis of punk as an artistic trend incarnating contents of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism or the Beat Generation (Kotynek, Cohassey 2008; Warner, 2013; Hawkins, 2015; Green, 2016).

A reemergent avant-garde

Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine, among many other creators who played an essential role in the formation of punk, are successors, both as musicians and poets, of the heroes of, as ethnomusicologist Steven Taylor defined it, “one of the least recognized lines of punk’s myth narrative”, mainly Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg (Taylor, 2003, p. 38). Those writers, activists and booksellers who in 1964 formed the art-rock music band bearing, in some situations, the somewhat embarrassing and troublesome name Fugs, were dubbed by fans and
myth searchers preoccupied with insightful studies of philosophy, aesthetics and sources of punk as the “founding fathers” of art-rock groups, the precursors of at least the New York proto-punk music bands and artists of the late-1960s and mid-1970s, thereby Patti Smith Group with Patti Smith and Television with Tom Verlaine as well (Taylor, 2016, p. 111; Ruggles, 2008, p. 40-41; Blush 2016, p. 61,99,262; Hjortsberg, 2013, p. 245.). Thinking about the art-rock punk of that time, it is, indeed, unavoidable, to situate the output of Tom Verlaine and Patti Smith in the context of the phenomenon of the oral poetry renewal of the 1950s and 1960s, which was only a part of “the larger underground and reemergent avant-garde” of that time (Taylor, 2003, p. 39). The Fugs, forgotten for most music enthusiasts, alike already legendary performers Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine and their close associate Richard Hell, began their careers as poets and only later did they become musicians. Although those who like to move around in the field of the stereotypically conceived musical subcultures may have difficulty accepting the fact that Verlaine, Smith and Hell arrived in “The Empire City” with the hope to get recognized by the world as poets, it is exactly those performers who are all but the primary predecessors of the whole punk poetry current that flourished in various countries, especially in Britain, but was born in the birthplace of punk rock itself, namely New York City.

Emerging science works concerning the literature of the early punk rockers, primarily of Richard Hell (Finney, 2012; Kane, 2010; Kane, 2011) could have been influenced by the fact that with the beginning of the new millennium representatives of the early New York punk scene have succeeded on the literary market, coming out with their own books regarding the trials and tribulations of those artists of the 70s related to punk rock music, making “the telling of this particular scene almost a genre unto itself”, as reviewer Helena Fitzgerald rightly notes (Fitzgerald, 2013). Especially the novel Just Kids by Patti Smith and to an even greater extent Godlike by Hell, deal with the poetry world of New York in the early 70s (Smith, 2011; Hell, 2005). Furthermore, in 1994, Marvin J. Taylor founded the gradually growing Downtown Collection at the Fales Library at New York University, which documents, among others, the downtown arts scene (SoHo and the Lower East Side) during the 1970s. Hereby the readers are being provided not only with a literary perspective on this special squad, but they are also more aware of the literary perspectives of the people who constituted it, as, gradually, literary and artistic “artifacts” left by the proto-punk icons are made available to all interested (Stosuy, 2006; Taylor, 2006, Ault 2002).

The first impression after getting acquainted with the mentioned, to varying degrees autobiographical, works is that there were a fraction within the proto-punk music scene to
which Smith, Verlaine or Hell belonged, whose members, autodidacts motivated by “intellectual ambitions”, found themselves “jobs in used bookstores, temples of intellect now dying” and “discovered poets who had as much passion as intellect or precision”, “drawn to poetry that was earthy and expressive”, to use the words of one of the reviewers of Hell’s autobiography (Mattson, 2013). It is not only that avant-garde has often been adopted into discussions about punk in the pursuit to position it within the tradition of artistic bohemia and extreme art (Donaghey, 2013, p. 152-154) and “the poetic side” of the New York punk musicians contributes to consolidating and strengthening the aura of “artistry” that surrounded their work. Also the novels and memoirs of the children of the punk rock spirit coming into existence in the 70s are filled with literary references which are a part of a sometimes sentimental and exaggerated image of a generation which deliberately based their choices and ethos on the philosophy of French nineteenth century poets, sincerely believing that the “first great lyric poet of the modern city, claimed as the forerunner of Dada and surrealism, the first beatnik, the first punk on the street [was]: Baudelaire.” (Jukes, 1991, p. 105).


The concerns of the scruffy bards

The Night, perhaps the least known publication of Smith whose growing popularity we can now observe, was released in London by Aloes Books and in Paris by Editions Fear Press in 1976. The French issue, containing the poems in both English and French versions, draws
attention with a very impressive design (it resembles a road map) whereas twenty-five copies of the London edition of *The Night* were labeled with autographs and marked with numbers. This book is a fruit of the punk movement arrival which manifested itself, among others, by the emergence of a young generation of people concerned with alternative publishing and the “do-it-yourself” approach accompanying this idea. Aloes Books, founded by the printer Jim Pennington and two poets from the alternative poetry scene, Allen Fisher and Richard Miller, was a publishing venture producing samizdat publications. Before the concert of Smith at the Roundhouse in London in 1976, Fisher and Miller contacted the artist by letter, asking her to prepare a poetic book, which would be released in the underground publishing scene of London. Although Aloes Books had a restricted market, what means that the numbers of shops that would take its literary propositions was not a huge one, they sold at least 8,000 copies of *The Night* (Ink Monkey, X).

Mick Farren, an English journalist, stated with full conviction that among the members of the punk movement flourished a more expansive and talented bunch of writers than the one “produced” in the hippie movement (Bockris, Bayley, p. 163). Having remembered his words and being aware of the surprisingly enormous number of copies of some issued titles, an important question arises: why are the literary achievements of the people who supported the early American punk movement not generally known and why does only Patti Smith figure in the popular consciousness as a proto-punk writer, since the punk emphasis on access and activity caused a stream of publications virtually impossible to control, be it in the form of self-produced books or fanzines? Victor Bockris and Roberta Bayley, who conducted their research in the 90s writing the book *Patti Smith: An Unauthorized Biography* come up with an answer: “Just as record deals were hard to come by, so were outlets for these poets and writers’ written work. As early as 1974, Nick Tosches, a contributing editor of new skin magazine, *Qui*, gave some of his friends, including Richard Hell and Patti Smith work writing for the magazine. Perhaps if there had been a punk poetry magazine at this time, it might have been as influential as *Punk* magazine, which introduced many writers and artists in the seventies. Other than these, though, punk writers had difficulty publishing outside the movement” (Bockris, Bayley, 1999, p. 164; see also: Hannon, 2000, p. 27). The output of impatient poets producing their own booklets or presses with the help of mimeographs or table-top offset printing machines usually circulated among friends of writers or audiences of music clubs, where poetry performances took place.

Without even opening the London edition of the work, we automatically discover probably the most recognized feature of American punk rock poetry created in the circle of
Smith – Hell – Verlaine and one of the many characteristics of New York’s Downtown Literary Scene – the patronage of Arthur Rimbaud. Probably the most known portrait of the young Master figures on the back cover of *The Night* and the editorial footer informs: “Cover and title page design after an 1886 edition of Rimbaud’s *Les Illuminations*” (Smith, Verlaine, 1976, unnumbered, p. 18). The figure and the allusions to the work of this French poet occurred very often in the work of American artists such as Kathy Acker, Patti Smith or David Wojnarowicz. Many poems by Smith, published after *The Night*, come from her poetical fantasies of Rimbaud that are primarily associated with the time when the poet gave up writing in favour of a working life and conducted commercial dealings in Abyssinia¹. But what is hidden behind one of punk’s myth narratives according to which Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell, inspired by the author of *The Drunken Boat* – his poetry, behavior, appearance, and legend – embodied and established a relationship between symbolists and punks? (Gendron, 2002, p. 251-254; McNeil, McCain, 2006, p. 108-113; 159-162). Certainly the dandy’s project that suggest to “put together for oneself an aspect – an image – as artificial as it is shocking; an image that, on the one hand, signifies an absence of signification, and on the other a strenuous joke, a furious challenge to those naïve advocates of authenticity who let themselves be impressed by such silly antics (Taylor, quoting Julia Kristeva, p. 59)” would be self-evidently welcome by many of the young punk artists disappointed by the 60s. The myth or the literature of Rimbaud would provide punk rockers, so often referring to the poet, with a vision of possessing the not disappearing greatness of childhood and the feeling of being an adolescent throughout one’s whole life, as well as the sense of continuing the tradition of modern bohemianism (regardless of how far they were able to separate, in their thinking of mid-19th century Paris, what is legendary or imagined, from what is historical). Patti Smith and her musician and literary friends romanticized both Rimbaud’s and Burroughs’ nihilism, their acting on the margins of society and exploring new forms of creativity enabling them to express their dissatisfaction with the middle class’ conventional attitudes to life and being a derivative of this discontent. One of Hell’s essays called *My Burroughs* even begins with the following, emphatic words: “Burroughs was the real Rimbaud, or at least the one who stayed the course” (George-Warren, 1999, p. 216; see also: Shaw, 2008, p. 42-44). Smith, Verlaine or Hell associated Burroughs, whom they perceived as their intellectual and artistic mentor, with the literary and countercultural tradition whose initiation is attributed to Rimbaud, and

¹ One of them is *Dream of Rimbaud*: Oh arthur arthur, we are in Abyssinia Aden making/love smoking cigarettes. we kiss. but its much more./azure. blue pool. oil slick lake. sensations telescope./animate. crystalline gulf. balls of colored glass./exploding. seam of berber tent splitting. openings, /open as a cave, open wider. total surrender”.

str. 6 ISSN 2353-6950
even, like many contemporary scholars of bohemianism, identified all the artistic environment of the Beat Generation (heirs of the 20th century bohemian enclaves which emerged in the United States, particularly in Downtown New York City) for whom Rimbaud’s symbolist poetry was a crucial inspiration, with the Parisian, 19th-century Bohemian life (Finney, 2012, p. 16). There are other important things that contributed to the creation of the “literary” myth of punk rock. For example, Smith purchased the reconstructed childhood home of Rimbaud (Muñoz-Alonso, 2017) and Hell’s nickname is a reference to A Season in Hell by Rimbaud, just as the pseudonym of his associate Tom Verlaine was drawn from another poet associated with the Decadent movement, Paul Verlaine (Waterman, 2011, p. 53-56).

Richard Hell, having arrived to New York, became interested in the activity of small-magazine publishers operating on the Lower East Side and, combining forces with poet David Giannini, published his own journal for three years, beginning in 1968. The photography presents the first page of the final issue of Genesis: Grasp (Genesis: Grasp, Grasp Press, New York 1971, No.5/6), the artistic and literary zine edited by Hell, with an image of Theresa Stern and Arthur Rimbaud on the cover. It contains seven poems by Richard Meyers (the real name of Hell), as well as six poems by Tom Miller (later: Verlaine).

Punk poets unreservedly, and yet tacitly, in a way that is not directly expressed, derided and criticized the established bombast, pathos and magniloquence of a substantial part of poetry, by touching on illicit, controversial themes in equally peculiar manners. In The Night we can find poems whose protagonists are barely sketched, poems scandalous in their
overt sexuality or violence, in their lack of tenderness or nostalgia, or blending sentimentality with ferocity and fetishism. Here is one of Smith’s pieces: “The young prostitute suffering the rite/of 1,000 thousand flowers…/afterward the women removed the shaved stick/and wilted blossoms and left her to rest alone/in a small room streaked with light” (Smith, Verlaine, 1976, unnumbered, XIX2). Punk writers would exaggeratedly encompass ornateness only to shockingly distort it; elevated imagery was “spoiled”, as angels in this poem from The Night: “little boy: I am hungry./war. children picking thru spoils…/sleds eyes oily pamphlets and statues of angels./children mounting… humping… licking…/defacing the statue of angels…” (Smith, Verlaine, 1976, XX). Downtown writing was, according to Joel Rose and Catherine Texier, the editors of the anthology Between C&D: New Writing from Lower East Side Fiction, far from gentle, affectionate literature crowded with able to be believed, credible heroes readers could identify, sympathize and commiserate with. Those researchers noticed the influence of the works of Burroughs, Miller, or Genet on the literary output of writers of New York’s Downtown Literary Scene (J. Rose, C. Texier, p. x-xi). Although Smith and Verlaine, like many other Downtown writers, did not use the cut-ups method perfected by Burroughs in which randomly selected words drawn from other pieces of writing were “stitched” together so as to create fresh representations, his idea of writing as taking part in the act of destruction of such a language that is the principal instrument of control, homogenization and imposing centralized meanings is visible especially in the way in which they undertake the theme of the antiheroic and ugly side of life. Smith and Verlaine describe crime, brutality, bestiality (“victim gropes soundlessly in eye of blizzard. /now snowblind it is unlikely he will retrieve/the leather envelope containing ear and tongue”; Smith, Verlaine, 1976, V), toxic human relationships (“I could not place Her accent. /Her voice the hypnotic eye./I could do anything she would say./Then she asked me to kill her./I grabbed the knife and plunged/the handle between her knees/into the mattress./I spit on her face and walked out.”; Smith, Verlaine, 1976, XIV), desperate loneliness or madness (“Despair invites the supernatural. The old man leaps out the window to find himself weightless and laughing. The window is now a large part of lips which whisper: ‘Get something going here’.”; Smith, Verlaine, 1976, VI), very often looking for their characters in worlds inhabited by the castaways of society.

When Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine and a number of other punk artists were creating in the very heart of the East Village, the neighborhood was full of decaying, abandoned
tenement buildings, violence and drug abuse. On the other hand this was the area that offered the cheapest apartments in the city, thereupon debuting artists used their freedom to try out a whole scale of artistic activity, residing in a place marked by institutional abandonment and bypassed by mainstream society (Mele, 2000, p. 180-219; Halasz, 2015, p. 94-97; Ocejo, 2014, p. 29-30; see also: Neculai 2004). While the economic downturn worked in their favors, as the cost of living was drastically reduced, making the area fertile ground for a new generation of creative bohemians, the environment in which they formed also must have left a mark on their art. The emerging of the punk culture with all its characteristic features in the mid-1970s (that is when Patti Smith Group and Television began their music careers), was a sign of the declining social, political and economic conditions in all New York City, and also an angry response to the corruption and general lack of integrity in American society.

night snow. enamel hills pommaded w/blood.
victim disrobed then adorned w/dress of perforated towels. mere hills strewn w/baby birds. rough handed children lean over and pluck them up the fragile skulls splinter like palace ice sculpture. victim inspects fine networks of frozen membranes then with mute horror gestures to the children.

children. so sinister they are completely aware of their own power (...) (Smith, Verlaine, 1976, III).  

– reading poems from The Night like the one cited above, encountering in them paradox and grotesque, a horror-like atmosphere and ritual abusive language, a rejection of mainstream pop humanism in favor of indifference and dread, we must keep in mind that the American punk community of then thrived amidst the urban despair. The writers, regardless of how consciously, commented on the larger society in which they lived, expressed their feeling of alienation in it and communicated it across the generation, not seeking to offer a solution and a different Utopia instead of the hippie Utopia and moralizing. Who is then the lyrical subject of the pieces contained in The Night? It is undoubtedly a relative of a punk dandy, such as was described by Steven Taylor: “The bourgeois ideal of the fully individuated subject and his
Romantic savage combine and emerge as the willfully abject subject, the ragamuffin dandy, champion of pre-Oedipal impulses, spewer-forth of all that should be repressed” (Taylor, 2003, p. 59).

Punk poetry, of course, depended heavily on rhythms and sound to express emotion; the artists, as the Beatniks earlier, would chant their writing in dramatic melodies, not afraid of the audience responding widely, relying heavily on a sense of immediacy, but Smith and Verlaine’s pieces, never recited during live performances, suggest that punk poetry is not always a question of motion and speed expressed live before an audience and of explicit references to rock music. For Smith and Verlaine punk music is not a direct subject of their writing at all, as opposed to, for example, some of the vibrant poems of Hell and Verlaine contained in their common work Wanna Go Out? In To Amplify My Eardrums we read: “Well I don’t belong here anyway. I am the only rock band on earth who’s the earth’s hernia” or “They came last night and amplified my eardrums” (Stern, 1973, p. 14). Yet although Smith and Verlaine’s literature is not a pronounced mirror of the life of a punk rocker, there is still a clear lyrical punk sensibility in them – a cynical response to what young punks perceived as self-satisfaction, smugness of suburbia and the cultural bankruptcy of the counterculture’s legacy.

An outstanding music critic, Greil Marcus, claims that punk “was not a music genre; it was a moment in time that took shape as a language anticipating its own destruction” (Marcus, 1990, p. 182) – this definition should not under any circumstances be applied to the content of The Night in the sense that could suggest that Smith’s and Verlaine’s poems are literally unspeakable. Their anti-language dimension lies rather in their often unnatural rhythm, reduced vocabulary, mixing personality with anonymity, and in the worlds that they depict, seeming to be so stifling and airless.
The only poetry book by Theresa Stern (the fictive pseudonym of Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine), under the title *Wanna Go Out?*, was issued in 1973 and has not been republished since then. The pamphlet design of the work is similar in form to *The Night* by Patti Smith and Tom Verlaine – it contains merely 17 poems. Hell and Verlaine’s poetry appeared before they debuted in New York’s CBGB Club in their extremely important for the history of music punk band Television, which would sometimes take stage together with the Patti Smith Group (*Patti Smith…*, 2015).

**The painters of tasteless images**

Because one of the characteristics of punk culture is coming back to the past in search of influences to then transform them and play with them, punk poetry must contain as many contradictions as punk music does. Then, it should not be surprising that the articulating of a clear and always accurate definition of punk poetry is and will stay a rather problematic task. A broader analysis of all Smith’s and Verlaine’s poems would introduce many elements broadening the image of punk poetry emerging from the reading of *The Night*. But if I am allowed to make a sweeping statement after presenting a brief analysis of the volume of poetry by Smith and Varlein and the cultural context of their output, the artists from the circle of the so called American punk poetry were creating, as (on different levels) all Downtown writers, literary works illustrating those dimensions of human life and feelings that are unwillingly drawn to daily light – the moods inhabited by unpleasant, unpalatable images. By following in the footsteps of Burroughs, who “fights post-bourgeois language with poetry: images, dangling clauses, all that lingers at the edges of the unsaid, that leads to and through...
dreams”, as Kathy Acker wrote about the author of *The Naked Lunch*, (Acker, 1997, p. 3) allowed punk artists to confront the world by using a crude, grim, obscene, disjointed surrealism and symbolism. They propose not a creation of new and unprecedented ways of characterizing people or situations, but the depiction of life’s most dramatic parts, which came to seem overly familiar yet still remain taboo – violence, sex or madness; for them every event in the universe, the most ordinary as well as the most deviating from the norm, is an absolutely human one and at the same time bizarre.

In some sense punk poets guarded earlier models of provocative artistic language, especially the one cultivated by the Beats, not wanting them to be too easily adapted, adjusted and deprived of their original radical character. Smith or Verlaine were never punished by court for the contents of their literature like their predecessors were, but their poetic language was a fight to sustain the legacy of opening poetry up to autodidacts, of popularizing poetry as an art which does not require the skill of academic preparation and of joining the zone of cultural production on one’s own terms.
Bibliography


