

## The Poetry of Sound

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THE RELATION OF SOUND TO POETRY HAS ALWAYS BEEN TRIANGULATED, IMPLICITLY OR EXPLICITLY, by an equally nebulous third term: sense. The relation is ambiguous, and shifting, because sound—especially in the context of poetry—is of that species of homographs which produce their own antonyms.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, sound—defined as “the audible articulation(s) corresponding to a letter or word” (def. 4b)—has been understood as distinct from linguistic meaning: “the sound must seem an echo to the sense,” as Pope famously put it (“Essay” 29). Furthermore, that distinction is often pushed to a full-fledged antonymy, so that sound is understood as being, by definition, diametrically opposed to meaning: a “mere audible effect without significance or real importance” (def. 4e). John Locke underscores that opposition in a passage in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*: “for let us consider this proposition as to its meaning (for it is the sense, and not sound, that is, and must be, the principle or common notion)” (31). Or we see the opposition, more famously, in Shakespeare’s phrasing: “. . . a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* 5.5.26–28). At the same time, however, sound can also denote precisely the signifying referent of language: “import, sense, significance” (def. 4d). Indeed, instead of posing an alternative to meaning, sound in poetry has been heard as conveying meaning in its own right. “In human speech,” Leonard Bloomfield asserts, “different sounds have different meanings” (qtd. in Jakobson, “Linguistics” 81). Jan Mukařovský concurs: “Sound’ components are not only a mere sensorily perceptible vehicle of meaning but also have a semantic nature themselves” (“Sound Aspect” 23).

At once the antithesis and the very essence of meaning, sound in poetry articulates

the same problems that have attended early-twentieth-century definitions of the category of poetry itself, reflecting the identical logic at a fractal remove. From the Prague school to Ludwig Wittgenstein to Tel Quel, modern philosophers of language have described poetry—which is to say, literary language broadly conceived, or simply “verbal art,” in Roman Jakobson’s eventual phrasing—as a kind of text that deviates from conventionally utile language by self-reflexively foregrounding elements other than the referentially communicative. Poetry, in these accounts, calls attention to structures such as sound while damping the banausic, denotative impetus of language.<sup>5</sup>

The ratios thus form a curious recursion: sound is to sense as poetic language is to conventional language, but the relation of sound and sense, understood in this way, is nested within the category of the poetic. Taken as the opposite of sense, sound, in the formalist economy, encapsulates the logic of the poetic. One among the material, palpable, quantifiable facets of language, sound contrasts with the ideas conveyed by the referential sign. Behind the Slavic formalists, we might of course also think of Ferdinand de Saussure’s attempt to define signs not as the relation of names and things but as the coupling of the “concept” indicated by the signified and the “image acoustique” ‘sound shape’ of the signifier (98). And further behind Saussure, as the quotations from Pope and Shakespeare attest, lies the intuitive sense that one can perceive aspects of language without comprehending its message. More complicated still, however, the *mise en abyme* of sound and poetry can also reflect (back on) the communicative side of the equation. The relation between material sound and referential meaning is often understood to itself be referential. The two key words in Pope’s declaration, for instance, bind sound to mimetic appearance: “sound must seem an echo to the sense.” Sound, in this understanding, thus also encapsulates the operation of meaning. The same is true when sound

is taken to be expressive in its own right and thought to “have a semantic nature” in itself.

Simultaneously bridging and sequestering, sound has accordingly been understood as both the defining opposite of meaning and the essence of meaning. This duplicity occurs not only because of the inadequacy of the vague term *meaning* but also because of the belief—implicit in Pope’s formulation—that the value of a poem lies in the relation between sound and sense. A mediocre term paper on “the poetry of sound,” available for purchase on the Internet, states the basic position clearly (if rather ineptly):

Poems usually begin with words or phrase[s] which appeal more because of their sound than their meaning, and the movement and phrasing of a poem. Every poem has a texture of sound, which is at least as important as the meaning behind the poem. (Williamson)

All the participants in the 2006 MLA Presidential Forum and its related workshops would agree with the general statement; indeed, one of the grounding premises for those panels and workshops was that the sound of poetry was—in all senses of the word—significant. The question, of course, is exactly *how* sound comes to be important in poetry. This is the place neither for a history of the poetics of sound nor for a careful parsing of the theoretical variations on the topic, but I do want to note the extent to which literary theorists have been both certain about the central importance of sound to poetry and unable to specify the nature of that importance. Jakobson is typical:

No doubt verse is primarily a recurrent “figure of sound.” Primarily, always, but never uniquely. Any attempts to confine such poetic conventions as meters, alliteration, or rhyme to the sound level are speculative reasonings without any empirical justification.

He goes on to quote Alexander von Humboldt: “there is an apparent connection be-

tween sound and meaning which, however, only seldom lends itself to an exact elucidation, is often only glimpsed, and most usually remains obscure” (“Linguistics” 81). The presentations in the workshops *Sound Poetry* and *Sounding the Visual* turned their attention to elucidating those connections.

In the opening forum, Susan Howe’s personal narrative of writing *Articulations of Sound Forms in Time* began accordingly with the glimpsed and obscure, two ocular terms that may be ironic in Humboldt’s sentence, with its vocabulary of appearance and elucidation, but that are to the point for Howe’s synaesthetic argument that voice and print are inseparable; “font-voices summon a reader into visible earshot,” she states, imagining the “blank space” of the page as an essential “quiet” that “articulates poetry.” Howe focused on sound as “mere audible effect” without coherent meaning or ordered structure: a “nonsense soliloquy” of “tumbled syllables” and “allophone tangles[s]” in a “vocalized wilderness” of “phonemic cacophony.” Such inchoate sounds are a recurrent theme throughout Howe’s work, but they also provide a formal model for the skewed, overprinted, partially legible or canceled lines that make the look of her poetry so distinctive.

Howe’s conflation of voice and print provides an ideal test case for Johanna Drucker’s argument, in the workshop *Sounding the Visual*, that the visual and aural do not always overlap, and indeed cannot ever be perfectly congruent, because the different codes used to sort linguistic material—some audible and some visual—mobilize fundamentally different kinds of cognition. While Drucker focused on the visual, on what is “not sound,” her arguments about the graphic features of texts illuminated the sound features of texts as well, since the two codes, though distinct, operate in the same fundamental way. Lacking “absolute values,” Drucker argued, “graphic codes and other material features are not static, inherent, or self-evident”; rather,

they are “provocations” to readers. Drucker, on this important point, is in accord with Benjamin Harshav’s arguments about the expressivity of sound patterns. For Harshav, the relation between poetic sound and sense is a back-and-forth process of recursive feedback. No sound pattern, in his view, is inherently meaningful; sibilants, for instance (to take his central example), have been understood as representing both silence and noise. However, once a poem’s reader identifies the presence of a sound pattern, certain referential statements from the poem—what one might think of as the conventional meaning of its “message”—are transferred onto that pattern, which in turn loops back to reinforce and foreground particular themes in the message (Harshav 144; cf. Tsur).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Brian Reed, in his wide-ranging talk at the same workshop on the medium of poetry, argued like Drucker that the given structures of texts (whether visual, bibliographic, aural, etc.) provide opportunities for authors and audiences to exploit, détourne, or rebel against. “The poem,” Reed explained, “has something to do with sound of course—one can scan it metrically, for instance, or talk about its intonation and tone—but it remains less vocalized than vocalizable.” Focusing on the limits of the vocalizable, Ming-Qian Ma’s theoretical analysis of what the Russian futurists termed *zvukopis*, or “visual noise,” brought Howe, Drucker, and Reed into direct dialogue. Contra Drucker, Ma proposed that the audible and visual are indeed translatable, asking—like Reed—what it would mean to read the kinds of paratextual writing presented along with a poem but not considered to be part of a poem: “geometric figures, scientific schemata, technical charts, mathematical notations” (Ma); “page numbers, line numbers, annotations, illustrations, choice of font” (Reed). Like Howe, Ma proposed that the visually obscure can not only be read but also actively invite and demand a voice: the “random drawings, obscure forms, fuzzy shapes, chaotic aggregates and the like,

which, confusing in representational intention and seemingly information-less in content, appear to be inarticulate or reticent.”

Other participants took a less semiotic approach, arguing that sense can only be sounded in a historicized space, with particular bodies and at specific cultural moments. Indeed, as several of the speakers showed, this is true of even the most abstract or seemingly meaningless sounds. Delivered in the workshop Sound Poetry, Stephen McCaffery’s paper investigated Hugo Ball’s *Lautgedichte*, poems that Ball composed as Christian Bök did his *Cyborg Opera*: by “arranging words, not according to their semantic meanings, but according to their phonetic valences” (Bök). McCaffery argued that even if purely phonetic arrangements of sound do not cohere into standard words or avail themselves of conventional grammars, they nonetheless cannot be understood—even as abstract, asemantic arrangements of sound—until heard against the background of their cultural and biographical contexts. Similarly, in his explication of the poetics of radio in Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée*, Rubén Gallo listened carefully to the seemingly meaningless sounds of the film’s mysterious radio transmissions, in which nonsensical snippets of surrealist poetry initially appear to be no more comprehensible than the beeps, whines, whistles, and “howling of secondary waves” with which they are presented. As Gallo showed, these sounds do indeed make sense when heard in the historical context—political as well as technological—of early radio. Similarly, Yoko Tawada’s account of dubbing, which Marjorie Perloff has already cited above, located the meaning of sounds in the culturally coded bodies that produce them; the same sounds are understood differently when heard in different contexts, where the speakers can be seen and their bodies scrutinized. Like Gallo, Tawada focused on electronic recording media, the film and tape that capture individual performances. Those performances were the subject

of Charles Bernstein's performative talk on the institutional archiving of poetry readings, which similarly insisted on the unique inscriptions made by individuals whose cultural positions are audible in their accents, aspects of voice that mark class, geography, gender, and race. Kenneth Goldsmith—who relies on audiotape and electronic recording to produce many of his own poems—attended in his talk, like Tawada, to patterns of silence and vocal discrepancies. Through his witty collage of quotations, Goldsmith listened in on the ability of recording media to both open and record unsounded gaps between noise and the body. For Goldsmith, meaning arises from the patterns of sound that are *not* consciously heard: the pauses and spaces that make speech audible; the phatic back-channel fillers and voiced pauses that punctuate messages (all the *ums* and *ahs* and *uh-huhs*); and those audible units, from rhyme to syllable to breath phrase, that can organize otherwise undifferentiated flows of speech. For all these speakers, sound is never either inherently noise or message; instead, sound and sense are located at the intersection of social bodies in particular spaces.

Such contextual approaches to literary sound deviate dramatically from the traditional “empiricist models” that Perloff has cited above. Alan Galt's *Sound and Sense in the Poetry of Theodor Storm*, for an example of one such model, attempts to scientifically demonstrate that the musical qualities of poetry “may be defined in terms of phonological ‘skew,’ i.e. deviation from the normal proportional distribution of sounds in poetic language” (Galt 1; cf. Fónagy). Galt (using a slide rule, no less!) tabulated all the phonemes in Storm's collected poetry, some 78,965 consonants and 43,641 vowels, according to his count (4). The outcome is almost ‘pataphysical, combining a sober scientific tone with absurd results and evoking the phonemic dictionaries of Velimir Khlebnikov (“Checklist” and “Warrior”). Galt determines that the phoneme *l*, for instance, evinces

[p]ositive skews in love poems and in narratives; strong positive skews in “tender” and “musical” poems. Negative skews in poems of family and home, nostalgia, and humor, with a negative skew for “non-musical” poems which is just below the level of significance. This phoneme certainly distinguishes, in Storm's verse, between “musicality” and its opposite, and its presence can evidently also contribute to a feeling of “tenderness.” (91)

The phoneme *u*, similarly, reveals “positive skews in nature poems, political poems, and in ‘musical’ poems. Negative skews in poems of age and death, and in humorous and occasional poems. Evidently this is a determiner of ‘musicality,’” and so on (94). Meaning in Galt's account is inseparable from sound, even as the significance of sound is imperceptible, recognizable only at the level of massive statistical analysis. Form here is indeed an extension of content: “a group of poems which share the same theme or content tends to show a phonological ‘skew’ which is broadly characteristic of that group” (1).

While Galt's work may have greater affinities with avant-garde poetry than with conventional literary criticism, I call attention to it because a focus on “musicality” like his is another point at which the presentations at the Presidential Forum differed from traditional scholarship. James McNeill Whistler famously opined that “music is the poetry of sound” (127), and poetry, in turn, has often been characterized as musical: “lower limit speech,” as Louis Zukofsky ran his calculus, “upper limit music” (138). Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote, in the early nineteenth century:

Sound is perhaps of all subjects the most intimately connected with poetic feeling, not only because it comprehends within its widely extended sphere, the influence of music, so powerful over the passions and affections of our nature; but because there is in poetry itself, a cadence—a perceptible harmony, which delights the ear while the eye remains unaffected. (168)

Ellis's argument echoes in John Hollander's entry "Music and Poetry" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which states that poetry and music "move to affect a listener in some subrational fashion, just as both are in some way involved in the communication of feeling rather than of knowledge" (804). That involvement of music in poetry is of particular significance, moreover, because it bears on our understanding of the lyric. According to Johnson's entry "Lyric" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, as Perloff notes above, lyric poetry "may be said to retain most pronouncedly the elements of poetry which evidence its origins in musical expression . . . the musical element is intrinsic to the work intellectually as well as aesthetically" (713). Indeed, "the irreducible denominator of all lyric poetry," according to Johnson, must be "those elements which it shares with the musical forms that produced. Although lyric poetry is not music, it is representational of music in its sound patterns" (714).<sup>7</sup>

The problem, of course, is what might be meant by *music*, a term no more stable or well defined than *lyric*. *Music*, in this context, is often taken to mean merely euphonious language, a mid-nineteenth-century sense of harmony and melodic line that "delights the ear." This definition in fact makes *music* a synonym for *sound*, one of the denotations of which is speech characterized by "richness, euphony, or harmony" (def. 4c). But music of course encompasses a range of works more expansive than the classical and Romantic imagination of the pleasant, mellifluous, or affecting. We might still define the lyric in terms of music, but what if the music represented by the lyric is Erik Satie's *Vexations*, a few bars of fragmentary melody meant to be repeated 840 times in succession? or György Ligeti's *Poème symphonique*, scored for 100 carefully wound metronomes? or John Cage's *Music for Piano*, composed by enlarging the imperfections found when a sheet of staff paper is scrutinized under a magnifying glass?

or the game pieces of John Zorn or the stochastic compositions of Iannis Xenakis or David Soldier's orchestra of Thai elephants? Or any number of works that Ellis would likely not have recognized as music at all?

The idea of music in this expanded field may no longer be especially useful for defining poetry, but, as several of the forum and workshop speakers evinced, it may be a productive tool for understanding poetry and for thinking in new ways about what poetry might aspire to do. Nancy Perloff's insightful parallel history of sound poetry and avant-garde composition, presented at the workshop Sound Poetry, made a clear case for the extent to which an expanded definition of music can expand the definition of poetry. In the musical field exemplified by Cage's double deconstruction of silence and noise as well as noise and music, sound remains central to music, even as it discards lyricism. Bök's explication of his own bravura athletic sound poetry similarly argued for the degree to which poetic practice can be expanded by enlarging the scope of what we consider musical: techno, electronica, beatboxing, the soundtracks to video games, the noise of power tools. "In order to explain avant-garde sound-poems through the trope of music," Bök argued, "poets of today may have to adopt a genre better suited to express our millennial anxieties in an era now driven by the hectic tempos of our technology." My own talk took tempo and technology as a starting point, listening to the electronic music of Alvin Lucier to better understand how the stutter can function as a formal structuring device for literature. Recovering the importance of sound and music for the strikingly visual poetry of the Brazilian concrete poets, Sérgio Bessa, one of the speakers in the workshop Poetic Sound in Translation, documented an earlier instance of Bök's call to adopt a sufficiently modern music adequate to the aspirations of a self-consciously modern poetry. Noting the importance of harmonic (rather than melodic)

structures to Décio Pignatari, as well as Augusto de Campos's debt to Anton Webern's notion of atonally emotive *Klangfarbenmelodie* (not to mention samba and bossa nova), Bessa demonstrated that "in several texts written in the early 1950s by the Noigandres poets, collectively and individually, one finds repeated references to sound, particularly the emerging new music of composers like Pierre Boulez, Guido Alberto Fano and Karlheinz Stockhausen." Likewise, Hélène Aji, in her presentation for the workshop *Sounding the Visual*, reread the visual texts of Jackson Mac Low in the light of his involvement with Cage and twentieth-century music, paying particular attention to the innovations in scoring and aleatory compositions noted in Nancy Perloff's historical sketch.

Rethinking the nature of sound, as Nancy Perloff explained, leads to new understandings of music in the twentieth century, and rethinking the nature of music, as these speakers all showed, can lead to new understandings of poetry. Or, to paraphrase David Antin's aphorism on the connection between modernism and postmodernism: from the music you choose, you get the lyric you deserve.

## NOTES

1. *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, a collection of essays based on the convention talks edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, will be published in book form by the University of Chicago Press in 2009.

2. The notable exception is Virginia Jackson's "Who Reads Poetry?" whose subject is the misguided "historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric" (183). The rhetorical discourse of Herman Melville's "The Portent," with its impassioned address to a public "you," differs appreciably, Jackson argues, from the Romantic lyric mode, which is the poem's context.

3. The most recent, Frost's "Spring Pools," was published in *West-Running Brook* (1928). Brent Hayes Edwards lauds the contemporary Martinican poet Monchoachi, but he cites and discusses, not any of his poems, but rather an impassioned Heideggerian speech on poetry

dating from 2003. Yet another nineteenth-century poet, Baudelaire, provides Robert Kaufman with his entry into the question of Marxist aesthetic in Adorno and Benjamin, but Kaufman is not concerned with the poems in *Les fleurs du mal* themselves. Finally, Rei Terada's "After the Critique of Lyric" reflects on lyric theory rather than on individual theories and is, not surprisingly, somewhat pessimistic about their future.

4. Joseph Shipley terms such words, like *cleave*, "autonyms" (128).

5. The literature is extensive, but see, for a starting point, Havránek, *Studie* (e.g., 11–18) and "Functional Differentiation"; Mukařovský, "Standard Language"; Jakobson, "Dominant" and "Linguistics"; and Kristeva.

6. To avoid confusion, let me note that Harshav's essay was originally published under the name Hrushovski.

7. Cf. Frye: "By musical I mean a quality of literature denoting a substantial analogy to, and in many cases an actual influence from, the art of music" (x–xi).

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