

Sound Poetry as Emancipation of Language

INVESTIGATION BY ÉRIC MANGION

Unwaveringly alternative, sound poetry is one of the more under-appreciated branches of literature. This might be primarily due to the fact that it escapes traditional language: words transform into sounds, and sounds become words. Behind this inversion hides a conception of language as a social practice, an idea carried the esthetic revolutions of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. It was a time of struggle against systems and dogma, starting with the rules imposed on language. Yet times have changed, and combats too. In today's era of new technologies that format the verb, of omnipresent orality and speaking, sound poetry remains as pertinent and singular as ever.

Sound poetry is commonly defined as a form of poetry that draws on the possibilities offered by technological tools to transform the voice and sounds produced by the body by mixing them with all kinds of natural (from the real world) or artificial (made by various instruments) sounds.

Above all, it is poetry that has emancipated itself from the book, and therefore from reading, and in most cases also from words and semantics. If these things are present, it is so words can take on a sound texture. They can be decried, repeated, whispered, deformed, fragmented or invented. Often there are not really words but onomatopoeia, babbling, echoes, resonances, domestic noises, breaths, chokings, rantings, vibrations, frictions and even cries of alienation, screams of pain or animal sounds. The prosody spectrum—inflection, tone, pitch, intonation, accent, the modulations that we lend our oral expression—is rather large. The poets often use phonetics—the sounds of language—through articular (emitting speech through organ positions and movements), acoustic (transmitting the sound wave between emitting and receiving bodies) or auditory (how sounds are perceived and decoded by the receiving body) techniques. Language becomes complex, material. It shapes and unshapes itself through exercise or repetition, acceleration, reverberation, saturation and alteration processes, but also through pauses or ellipses, or any number of other techniques.

Cabarets

The origins of this poetry date back to the smoky cabarets of the 1870-1880s that were wildly successful in most European cities. There people could drink, sing, curse at one another, read texts aloud, and act out scenes of ordinary life in the spirit of revolution, joy or irony.

The cabaret's "host" was neither an impressionist artist nor a pompous painter. He refused all categories. Often, he was an adventurous musician, a libertarian journalist, a marginal poet, a bohemian of the dandy persuasion born only a few years earlier. In Paris, the Commune and the end of journalistic censorship played a major role. Street advertising grew more democratic, enabling cabarets to conduct actual "marketing" campaigns that were entirely innovative at the time. Le Chat noir is the most emblematic of these unruly venues.

Origins

It wouldn't be until the avant-garde of the early twentieth century that sound poetry would truly come to be theorized and spearhead a new esthetic. In 1912, in the midst of the Siege of Adrianople in Turkey, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Futurism (1909) and author of the "enquête internationale sur le vers libre" (international study on free verse – 1905) writes a text entitled *Zang Tumb Tumb*, a series of onomatopoeia meant to describe the "orchestra of warfare".

In 1913, another Futurist, Luigi Russolo, writes a manifesto that will mark the history of twentieth century art: *The Art of Noises*. In it, he sustains that the human ear has grown accustomed to speed, energy and the noises of the urban industrial soundscape, and that this new acoustic palette demands a renewed approach to instruments and musical composition. He elaborates on several conclusions in which he describes how electronics and other technologies will enable musicians of the future to substitute 'a limited number of sounds belonging to today's orchestra with an infinite variety of sounds contained in noises, reproduced by way of the appropriate mechanisms.'

The Russian Futurists (Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kroutchenykh and Ilia Zdanevitch) invent for their part the *zaoum* (1913), a poetry aimed mainly at organizing sounds in and of themselves. *Zaoum* is a composite of the Russian prefix *za-* ("beyond") and the word *oum* ("spirit"), and can be understood as "trans-mental". *Zaoum* has no grammatical rules, no semantic conventions, no style norms. It is an expression of primordial emotions and sensations, and that is all. Sounds precede meanings and represent a natural, and therefore universal, element of human communication.

The Dada Cabaret Voltaire is inaugurated in Zurich on February 5, 1916, not with an exhibition but with gestures, sounds and words, described as follows by Hans Arp: "The people around us are shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos ... Tzara is wiggling his behind like the belly of an Oriental dancer. Janco is playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping. Madam Hennings, with a Madonna face, is doing the splits. Huelsenbeck is banging away nonstop on the great drum, with Ball accompanying him on the piano pale as a chalky ghost. We were given the honorary title of Nihilists."

The *Ursonate* (1921-1932) by Dadaist Kurt Schwitters is certainly the most emblematic poem to come from the avant-gardes. The piece's fame can be attributed to the fact that it was

the first to be recorded by its author (for the first time in 1932). The poem cannot really be considered sound poetry. No outside sound, no technical intervention is present in the recording. Yet it nevertheless stands as a bridge between two eras.

The contribution of machines and techniques

The difference between sound poetry and the essentially phonetic poetry that was practiced in the first part of the twentieth century is mainly the role of the machine and therefore technology. The body, the mouth, the sounds of words are not the only protagonists. As recording technology grows more simple and democratic over the years, not only can more poems be recorded and new broadcasting methods invented, but it also becomes possible to layer words and sounds produced by the body with outside sources of sound in order to push the experimentation even further.

Swiss philologist Paul Zumthor—an expert of grammatical and linguistic textures in text, and also a poet involved in the art from the 1950s to the 70s—insists on sound poetry’s general use of electronic media starting in the 1950s, and its ‘close, almost genetic link’ connecting it to technology.

ReVox recorders end up playing a major role. Designed in 1948, commercialized starting in 1951, they meet with incredible success, particularly in radio station studios. They are light and easy to use. Reel to reel turns into a source of inspiration both technically and poetically. It can be cut and layered following the same principles of collage as developed by the modern painters a few years earlier, but also using cut-up techniques invented by poets Gil Wolman and Bryon Gysin: An original text is cut into random fragments and then recomposed to create a new text. Magnetic tape also makes it possible to invent a new sound, recognizable amongst a thousand others for its almost metallic sound substance consisting of iron oxide particles assembled and magnetized onto a flexible strip of plastic film. It is a quintessential example of Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan’s famous saying, “the medium is the message.”

Musique concrète

The 1950s are also a time when ‘concrete music’ begins to develop, owing its popularity to the simplification in electroacoustic technologies. Its godfather and pioneering thinker, Pierre Schaeffer, speaks of music ‘constituted with the help of pre-existing elements’ and borrowed from any possible sound material. It is a time when musicians like Karlheinz Stockhausen or Edgar Varèse and his *Poème électronique* (1953) are discovered—the latter having been influenced three decades earlier by Russolo’s experimentations. Music is now leaving behind traditional instruments to embrace the technologies of the time. Above all, it departs from the purely musical domain and starts to resemble what would from then on be known as ‘sound art’.

Letterism and sound

Although Belgian poet Paul De Vree was, technically speaking, the first to have recorded, in 1948 at the Antwerp radio station, a poem using montage and layering different sound sources, the Letterists incontrovertibly played a pivotal part. Not only did they reactivate the Futurist and Dada experimentations that two dark decades had relegated to oblivion, they also, and above all, returned sound to the center of their theoretical and practical preoccupations. Isidore Isou maintained that *Venom and Eternity* (1951) was first and foremost a sound film. In it, he invents ‘discrepant sound’, one that is completely disjointed from the image. *Tambours du jugement premier* (1952) by François Dufrêne, on the other hand, contains neither screen, nor image, nor film stock. The film exists solely through the spoken accounts of four speakers/performers (Wolman, Marc’O, Guy Debord and Dufrêne himself) who, one after the other, speak aphorisms aloud in the cinema. As for Wolman’s *Anticoncept* (1952), it is no more than a long poem “projected like a projectile” onto a weather balloon floating in space. Wolman’s megapneumes (poems based on breath) or Dufrêne’s *Crirythmes* (organic sounds made by the body) were performed for the first time between 1952 and 1953, and recorded a few years later.

But it was not until 1958, after returning from his military service in Morocco, that Dufrêne would start to manipulate magnetic tape as a material in its own right to compose *Paix en Algérie*. Out of phonetics, poetry becomes sound. And now it consists of three aspects: body, language and machine.

Henri Chopin and Bernard Heidsieck

It is always a sensitive issue to name a founding act or attribute genius, even if Dufrêne and Wolman deserve their place in the pantheon. But it was Henri Chopin and Bernard Heidsieck who best embodied this new form of expression, for they not only practiced it regularly, they also transmitted and theorized it. Their duality is actually rather edifying. The former surpasses the verb, even the phonetic verb, to move toward expression entirely through sound, whereas the latter maintains semantics. Chopin founded the magazine *Ou* on vinyl record, the main propagator of sound poetry between 1964 and 1974. Heidsieck organized several events that were host to all manner of initial encounters between experimental poets.

Internationalization

At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, sound poetry goes international, in Great Britain (Bob Cobbing), Sweden (Sten Hanson or Åke Hodell), Germany (Carlfriedrich Claus or Franz Mon), Brazil (Augusto de Campos or Décio Pignatari), Belgium (Paul De Vree), Italy (Arrigo Lora Totino), the United States (John Giorno), Japan (Seiichi Niikuni),

Czechoslovakia (Ladislav Novák), Uruguay (Clemente Padín), Poland (Klaus Groh), Switzerland (Arthu Pétronio), Canada (Nobuo Kubota). Without forgetting Brion Gysin, an artist with no determined nationality who saw himself as a bridge between his Dada and surrealist influences, abstract painting, the literary and human experimentation of the American beat generation and European experimental poetry. His tautological poem *I Am That I Am* (1958), created with the help of a random software program made by engineer Ian Sommerville, is a model of the genre.

The development of vinyl, evolutions in analog recording, the first synths or samplers, easier access to radio recording studios, and more generally what the Anglo-Saxons called broadcasting, that is, all modes of transmission, are major factors in the planetary development of this new artistic practice.

The different styles

But underneath this universality of form, the content is noticeably different depending on the contexts or personalities.

The Brazilians are, for example, influenced by concrete poetry, whose character is conceptual, graphic and tautological. A poem should be “a reality of its own” rather than a declaration on reality, as understandable as “signs in airports or on the street”.

Some cannot help but be influenced by their political environment, living under South American dictatorship (Clemente Padín) or under the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe (Ladislav Novák).

Others, such as Gerhard Rühm and Ernst Jandl (Austria) or Emmett Williams and Jackson Mac Low (USA) belong to broader artistic currents: the Wiener Gruppe and Fluxus, respectively.

True to its anti-establishment nature, sound poetry fits in closely with the emancipatory movements of the time. Katalin Ladik (Serbia) or Carolee Schneemann (USA) are among the first female artists in this domain. Each invents, in her own way, a language inclined to feminist concerns and sees the importance in demanding they be heard loud and clear. An attitude that spurs a clash in the poetry field, which at the time is male-dominated.

From the early 1960s on, sound poetry also develops alongside another emerging art form: performance. Confrontation with the audience is the best way to preserve that bit of spontaneity, or improvisation, borne from the avant-gardes to face the ever-increasing use of technology. Performance art is the art of the body in space. Giovanni Fontana (Italy) is, for example, a remarkable performer who, using very few resources, manages to entirely occupy the perimeter around him. Heidsieck described his own art as “poetry-action” and his poems as “scores”. Performance in this scenario is resolutely performative: “When saying is doing”, to use an expression by English philosopher John Austin.

Self-indulgence and getting trapped

Like any form of creation, however, sound poetry can fall prey to self-indulgence. The kind that manifests itself as exaggerated expression, invective, vociferations or declamations that sometimes plague performances. These perhaps made sense in the years leading up to the 1950s, like so many screams surging from the body in the name of an art that saw itself as an emancipatory act from all systems, dogma and beliefs. But utopias are not all alike: the principles that came from the avant-garde have been re-questioned (especially the belief that universal language is a social link), and it would be silly to replay the same combats when times have changed. An imposture demanded as such by Dada might seem today like academic posturing. Sound poetry can sometimes also suffer from an over-fascination with new technologies that end up erasing any trace of poetry. The purely digital is boring.

Another trap is an over-attachment to music, like in the case of Slam which, indeed, represents an authentic form of contemporary poetry, but that, to follow the example of poet Kate Tempest, participates in a markedly different kind of reasoning than sound poetry's, as it aims to be perfectly "spoken" and "sung". The kinship with popular music is very complex to establish. In his book *Lipstick Traces* (1989), American music critic Greil Marcus draws a genealogy—which he calls a "secret" one—tracing a line from phonetic poetry to sound poetry all the way to the punk movement. The idea is relevant and defended with verve. But it is hard to compare sound poetry to anything at all. Without conducting some deeper research, the only statement that could be defended here is that it cannot be dissociated from the phenomenon of electric amplification that was foundational for rock music in the mid-1950s.

Contemporary variations

Certain sound poets were able to evolve with the times. Digital technology today offers a huge palette of possibility. Ian Hatcher (USA) uses algorithms to vary his range of sound. Anne Le Troter (France) works with information banks made from Data. Jörg Piringer (Autriche) on the other hand immerses himself in interactive systems, online communities and even video games. Eduard Escoffet (Spain) or Steven J. Flower (Great Britain) are all-around activists, able to transcend techniques by increasingly involving mixing tables.

The sounds have indeed lost the analogic texture that contributed so much to their charm, but they have gained more finesse and rhythm. The wish for a spatial rendition of sounds as put forth in particular by the couple Ilse and Pierre Garnier (France) in the 1950s and 60s (little known but fundamental poets) is finally taking shape today. This new dimension is present for example in Rike Scheffler's work (Germany), who is particularly demanding when it comes to how the pieces are broadcasted. It is no coincidence that she worked with sculptor Olafur Eliasson (Iceland), who is known precisely for his ambitious installations in space.

Social practice and information theory

Ultimately, what still and always will predominate in contemporary sound poetry is the relationship to language. For the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, who were masters at tabula rasa and a complete re-working of art, no new form of creation could be envisioned without changing the world and therefore changing language. Tzara, for example, despised any smooth, clean and formatted language, which he considered “journalistic”. Dada’s language should reflect the chaotic complexity of the world.

For Russian linguist and theorist Victor Shklovski, who was close to the Futurists of his country, literature should be a social practice. In concrete terms, it should be involved in our vision of things, not only in narrative description of events, in realism or fiction, but also in the very forms of writing. Shklovski thus invented the principle of “defamiliarization”, that is, an invented set of processes that aim to make writing poetic, using the unexpected to transform the familiar. To do so, you first have to abolish the former meanings of words, erase all the secular logics of vocabulary, recycle the used forms of syntax and reshape the association of ideas whose automatisms pollute speech. In other words, it was time to destroy the rationality of language, which for Dada and the Futurists was what gave rise to the conformity inherent to bourgeois and anesthetized societies.

This theoretical thinking that the avant-gardes embodied in sound poetry is of course related to their own utopia. We can deem it idealistic and not applicable. It resurfaces however in an opposite and inherently radical point of view at the end of the 1940s with the theory of information developed by American mathematician Claude Shannon. He sets in motion a techno-communicative practice of communication, mainly through information coding, data compression and cryptography. Shannon was a pure engineer working for the Bell communications company. On paper, he hardly seemed like an idealist. And yet, amongst his hobbies, and to illustrate his ideas, was the invention of a “useless machine” intended to shut down as soon as it was turned on. The “on” activates the “off”. This incongruity characterized, in his eyes, the ubiquitous situations in which communication “paradoxically resides in the absence of communication, utility in the absence of utility.”

Paradoxical though it may seem, this probabilistic and technical information theory echoes the works of sound poets, because it questions the purely semantic logic of language by using a group of signs and codes that have nothing to do with their typical use. It is also echoed in contemporary music, with composer Iannis Xenakis who, starting in 1956, develops a so-call “stochastic” music (calculated by probabilities) very close, once again, to the analog conceptions of sound poetry.

Necessity

Although today’s revolutionary spirits are no longer the same, there is still an urgent desire to question how language is structured, mainly when facing so many forms of

standardization. Wall Street English is substituting Shakespeare in all four corners of the world, much to the detriment of local languages. Orality may indeed be riding high—podcasts are proliferating everywhere—but the time for speaking is increasingly timed, counted and measured, depending on the spans and demands of the listener’s attention. Our Western society likes to talk; it likes above all to comment, reducing judgment to the snappy formulas required by social media. Editorialists often replace philosophers. But we have little interest in the forms of language in and of themselves, in their ability to say things. Language is not just verbal. In becoming sound, it might tend toward universality. But is a sound really universal? Certainly not. Sounds obey the same logic as words. Their meaning and their impact vary depending on the context.

Which is why sound poetry is still relevant. When we listen to Maja Jantar (Belgium) or Violaine Lochu (France) today, we are stunned by the polyphonic and multilingual dimension of their poetry. Kgafela Oa Magogodi, one of the rare African artists (Zambia) known in the sound poetry field, reminds us of the essential role that bodily-produced sounds play in the complex and diverse construction of African languages.

Transforming literature

Paradoxically, if new technologies are in part responsible for the digital rationalization of language due to an excess of simplification, they are also an opportunity to depart from its traditional logics. Even if Kenneth Goldsmith (creator of the UbuWeb platform) is not a sound poet per se, and even less a romantic revolutionary, he defends the new possibilities offered by the digital and the internet to transform literature. He is one of the main supporters of “post-internet poetry”: forms that use search engines and blogs, and find their raw material in the cornucopia of the Web. Additionally, for several years now, Ubu constitutes the vastest archival source for sound poetry, as for every other form of experimental creation related to image or sound.

Alternative spirit

Sound poetry is therefore not the territory of the human body resisting the machine. Nor is it a cybernetic body that aims to fuse these two entities. It remains first and foremost a human body, but one that knows how to make astute use of the tools available today. It represents a kind of primitive language, one that maybe pre-dates what we have been practicing since the start of civilization, and at the same time, it is an attempt at surpassing this: a kind of post-language, in sum. Henri Chopin suggests that sound poetry is an important step in poetic history by erasing the separation between music and poetry. “[...] One must say that (it) is not at all an avant-garde movement. It is a recognition of the millennia of orality with a short foray into four centuries of what Zumthor called literary poetry.”

Perhaps it is in this new paradox, between returning to essential forms and the desire to “surpass” academic language that was so important for Dada and then the Situationist International, that sound poetry retains its singularity. It is indeed one of those rare artistic forms of expression to come from the twentieth century that never succumbed to ideological or commercial exploitation. Nearly eighty years after its first baby steps, it has still held on to its alternative spirit. It is by no means a comfortable form, nor is it always easy to listen to. It is not smooth and aseptic. It is the antithesis to the ‘newspeak’ imagined by Orwell.

Translation by Maya Dalinsky

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