

Archive Needs Poetry

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Texte original extrait de : Patrick Beurard-Valdoye, « L'archive a besoin des arts poétiques », *Archives sonores de la poésie*, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2019, (L'écart absolu), p. 77-78 et 85-89

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« Echo est bien plus intéressante que Narcisse »²

Comment la lecture poétique défie-t-elle l'archive ? Le recueil *Archives sonores de la poésie*, dont est issu le texte du poète et critique d'art Patrick Beurard-Valdoye, questionne la création de l'archive à la fois en tant qu'œuvre, document et trace. Œuvre, car toute archive est l'objet d'une création. Document, car l'archive est vouée à recueillir et organiser la production historique autour d'une personne, d'un événement ou d'un fait. Trace, enfin, car en collectant des documents dans des collections identifiables, l'archive les sauvegarde comme marque laissée dans le temps, aspirant à rendre celle-ci indélébile.

Le corpus singulier que constituent les lectures publiques faites par les poètes, le statut évanescent de la déclamation et de l'*auralité* (dimension sonore de l'écrit) distincte de l'oralité (qui met l'accent sur la respiration, la voix, la parole) nécessitent des méthodes de conservation appropriés. Un constat traverse tout le volume : en Angleterre, en Allemagne et aux Etats-Unis, le renouveau de la lecture publique datant des années 1950 coïncide avec le développement de l'*audio criticism* et la création de sites et

archives dédiées. En France, en revanche, les enregistrements de lectures poétiques restent à ce jour éparpillés et aucun volet spécifique consacré à la poésie n'existe ni dans les Archives de la parole (créées dès 1913), ni sur Gallica, ni dans les archives de l'Ina. A une époque qui connaît l'avènement de l'archive numérique, via des sites expérimentaux tels UbuWeb ou PennSound, les éditeurs et contributeurs aux *Archives sonores de la poésie* ambitionnent de contrer la privatisation et l'exploitation commerciale des archives. Ils ont ainsi envisagé un site Web qui permettrait de référencer, d'indexer et de situer des enregistrements existants de poètes de langue française, mais aussi de contribuer à la préservation d'enregistrements importants et menacés.³

Au sein de ce projet, Patrick Beurard-Valdoye, *artiste de l'écriture*, place l'archive du côté d'Echo plutôt que de Narcisse, du côté de la reprise vocale amoureuse, plutôt que de la perte dans l'autocontemplation. Au lieu d'être un événement ponctuel, la poésie partagée à voix haute (hors studio) et son archivage constituent pour lui une vaste interrogation sur les arts poétiques et leur organisation. En retour, les arts poétiques, méditation sur les savoirs et leurs liens, permettent d'affiner les méthodes d'archivage. Patrick Beurard-Valdoye partage une conception élargie de la poésie où le « narré »⁴ (par opposition à la narration et au récit) est la forme singulière que prend chaque poème dans son rapport au réel, et qui est loin de se limiter à la seule écriture ; où l'exil, bien plus qu'un motif biographique – vécu par le poète aussi bien en Irlande qu'en Allemagne – est « un pôle inhérent de la poésie », exil dans sa langue maternelle et exil structurant la matière poétique même.⁵ Cette conception, nourrie entre autres de la figure du *Dichter* allemand, de DADA et de musique contemporaine, pousse le poète à parler d'une « urgence d'enregistrer la voix lisant ».⁶

La lecture publique défie l'archivage car elle est affaire d'espace, de choix de gestes, de textes, de rythmes et de voix, de *Sprachlichkeit* [plasticité de la langue, selon la traduction qu'en propose Patrick Beurard-Valdoye], mais aussi d'écoute à double sens entre poète et auditoire. Elle a non seulement accompagné les premières expérimentations avec la *talking machine* d'Edison enregistrant des voix poétiques (Charles Cros, Robert Browning).⁷ Elle est au cœur de l'émergence des nouvelles prosodies modernes, jusqu'à l'expansion de la poésie dans l'espace, hors-page, au-delà ou en-deçà de l'écriture.

Deux figures tutélaires se démarquent dans le texte que nous traduisons ici : celle de Kurt Schwitters, exilé et modèle de conduite active dans un contexte hostile aux artistes, et celle de Joseph Beuys avec son intérêt pour la plasticité sculpturale du son. Engagé pour la poésie comme acte, *enactment* (Charles Olson) et pour la poésie action (Boris Pasternak, Ghérasim Luca, Bernard Heidsieck), Patrick Beurard-Valdoye réactive et transmet l'énergie de la parole poétique partagée. Sa recherche de méthodes, espaces, outils et moyens pour en assurer l'archivage est d'autant plus importante à une époque où l'écologie sonore représente un enjeu culturel et social décisif, et où la sortie de la page, la mise en espace et la performance vocale fécondent la pratique littéraire. Echo, la nymphe qui par ses reprises vocales éphémères garde le son vivant en elle, est intéressante en cela qu'elle figure à la fois l'utopie de la restitution de la voix intacte et la nostalgie de sa conservation.

Tania Vladova

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“Echo is much more interesting than Narcissus”⁸

How do poetic readings challenge the creation of archives? The edited collection *Archives sonores de la poésie*, from which the following text by poet and art critic Patrick Beurard-Valdoye was taken, examines the creation of the archive as artwork, as document and as trace. As artwork, firstly, because every archive came into being through creation. As document, because the archive is aimed at collecting and organising historical productions that concern a person, an event, or a fact. And lastly, as trace, because by compiling documents into identifiable collections, the archive safeguards them as an imprint left in time, thus aspiring to make them last.

The unique corpus comprised of public readings performed by poets, and the evanescent status of declamation and *aurality* (the auditory dimension of writing) – which is different from orality (the latter emphasises breathing, voice and speech) – is a challenge to archival practice, thus requiring appropriate conservation methods. One observation permeates the volume: in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States, the renewal of public readings in the 1950s coincided with the development of audio criticism and the founding of dedicated venues and archives. In France, however, existing recordings of poetry readings have not been unified and there is no specific section devoted to poetry either at the Archives de la parole [Archives of speech, created in 1913], on Gallica [the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s digital library] or in the Ina’s [Institut national de l’audiovisuel] archives. As digital archives are being developed in English-speaking contexts, via experimental websites such as UbuWeb and PennSound, the editors and contributors of *Archives sonores de la poésie* considered creating a website that would reference, index and locate the existing recordings of francophone poets, as well as contribute to preserving important and threatened recordings, in order to counter the privatisation and commercial exploitation of archives.⁹

In this project, Patrick Beurard-Valdoye, a *writer-artist*, connects archives with Echo rather than Narcissus, that is, with enamoured vocal reproduction rather than loss through self-contemplation. According to him, poetry shared out loud (excluding studio readings) and its archival are not merely a punctual event, but rather a broad exploration of poetic arts and their organisation. In return, poetic arts, as meditations on human knowledge and their interconnections make it possible to refine archival methods. Patrick Beurard-Valdoye shares an expanded concept of poetry. According to him, what is told [*le narré*]¹⁰ is what informs every poem in its relationship with reality. Poetry is far from being limited to the written form. It’s a matter of exile that is more than just a biographical motif, experienced by the author in Ireland and Germany; it’s an exile in one’s native language, that structures the very material of poetry, an “inherent pole of poetry.”¹¹ This notion, which derives, amongst others, from the figure of the German *Dichter*, DADA, and contemporary music, has led him to allude to “the importance of recording voices reading poems.”¹²

Public readings challenge archives because they include space, the choice of gestures, texts, rhythms and voices, *Sprachlichkeit* [which Patrick Beurard-Valdoye translates as the plasticity of language], as well as listening, on the part of the poet and the audience alike. They took part in pioneering experimentations such as Edison’s talking machine, which recorded the voices of poets (Charles Cros, Robert Browning)¹³, as well as being crucial for the emergence of new modern prosody, including the expansion of poetry into space, beyond pages, beyond or below writing.

Two tutelary figures stand out in this text: Kurt Schwitters, an exile and an active model of conduct in a context that was hostile to artists, and Joseph Beuys, who was interested

in sound's sculptural plasticity. Committed to poetry as gesture and enactment (Charles Olson) as well as to poetry as action (Boris Pasternak, Ghérasim Luca, Bernard Heidsieck), Patrick Beurard-Valdoye reactivates and transmits the energy of shared poetic speech. His search for methods, spaces, instruments and ways for ensuring its archival is all the more important at a time when the ecology of sound represents a decisive cultural and social issue, and when exit from the page, transposition into space and vocal performance contribute to fertilising literary practices. Echo, the nymph whose ephemeral vocal reproductions kept sound alive inside her, is interesting inasmuch as she represents the utopia of integrally restoring voices and the nostalgia of their conservation.

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- 1 No Echo
- 2 It is sometimes said that poets are narcissistic.
- 3 But often, it is forgotten that Narcissus is as narcissistic as he is deaf to Echo's call.
- 4 Echo is particularly interesting for the art of poetry, as she frets and wastes away, leaving only the trace of her voice, which gradually fades out before disappearing completely. Nothing can give us back a lost voice.
- 5 In some cases, no one realised how important it was to record a voice reading a poem. Time does not always keep its archives up to date.
- 6 We do not know how the reading voices of Tristan Tzara, Henri Michaux and Saint-John Perse sounded, like so many other outcasts of the recording era. However, caution is in order and hope remains, as it is likely hidden archives may still come to light.
- 7 The voices of a few poets were saved thanks to Henri Chopin and the audio periodical *Ou*, in particular the voice of Raoul Hausmann.
- 8 The Visual Echo of a Voice: *die Stimme*
- 9 In Joseph Beuys's 1949 drawing *Die Stimme* [The Voice], the artist's intention was to represent invisible energy forms. He attempted to convey the invisible movement of speech and thought. To document its sensory qualities. To fix its vibration.
- 10 Beuys said that humans access the plasticity of sound before they access sight.
- 11 He keenly focused on the plasticity and sculptural nature of speech. In the 1950s, he created the *Ulysses* notebooks, drawings which prolonged Joyce's *Ulysses*. Drawings are another form of language. It is through words that images are revealed.

I try and maintain this *Sprachlichkeit* [a word that is difficult to translate: the stuff language is made of; its plasticity or speakability] within a broad fluidity, within motion, in order to extract it from the uniform and usurped concept of language in its cultural and rational development.¹⁴
- 12 Public Readings: the Uttering Voice
- 13 I am addressing public readings here, which I distinguish from studio readings, to which I will, however, refer, in order to support my argument.
- 14 I define public readings as a system that includes the venue and audience – which is not exclusively comprised of people the author knows. It implies, contrary to studio readings, a privileged exchange with the audience, in presence and in the present tense, or, to be more precise, with the audience in a given location, meaning that this exchange may vary if the venue's configuration changes. I do not read in an artist's

studio the same way as I read at the Maison de la Poésie or the Marguerite Audoux library [both in Paris]. I do not read the same texts, I do not make the same gestures, I do not place or project my voice in the same way; I do not shine the same poetic principles on my poem. The reading voice has a morphic variability, which is mostly the result of parameters external to the text being read. I like to say that walls also have ears, inasmuch as we also read for the walls – and sometimes against them.

15 I paradoxically believe that a reading is successful if the author has managed to listen to his or her audience during the reading. This is why I prefer the term of attendees [assistance], because when the audience attends a reading, it also attends to the poet who is giving the reading, giving of him or herself at the same time – which can be a slightly bruising experience.

16 [...]

17 Among the “20th century’s greats”, Pierre Reverdy, with his slightly gravelly accent and his unusual delivery, is one of the rare poets to partially avoid contemptuous speech. But the young and quivering buds of words remain crushed by a system. It must be emphasised that this imperial reading style survived into the 1990s, albeit in an attenuated form.

18 Recordings of public readings by André du Bouchet are scarce. One can hear him read *Solstice* in March 1997 at *L’Ecrit-Parade* (Lyon), in which a bombastic effect, not quite freed from the diction of the genre’s trailblazers, is still detectable. The act of reading evidences the classical side of this kind of poetry, although du Bouchet had so remarkably shaken it up visually: firstly, through the singular stretching-out of his lines of verse across the page, and secondly through his attempts to disrupt punctuation systems. In my opinion, this last aspect is the way André du Bouchet innovated most, in line with William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*. But this is very different from the reading voice of his friend Paul Celan, which at times seems to be dancing, and at others appears to be treading on eggshells, for instance in Stuttgart in 1970, where André du Bouchet gave a lecture on Hölderlin. It is also extremely unlike Robert Creeley’s diaphanous voice, which he asked Jean Daive to translate.

19 André du Bouchet seemed more comfortable, more at one with his own body and the body of the poem in smaller, private, spaces – bookshops, for instance.

20 His voice reading *Solstice*, therefore, seems to turn away from us, as these two verses by André du Bouchet suggest:

[...] That is not turned toward us:
that I should say so, and in my voiceless speech this whiteness silently bursts.

21 But as Jacques Roubaud told Georges Perec (on the subject of the influence of the Surrealists): “We cannot go on like this, we need to move on.”¹⁵

22 At that time, many poets, refusing such authoritative speech, assumed a certain neutrality, a sort of ironed-out diction. A voice without effect, deliberately banal, in the service of a poem whose authoritarian power had been “cleaned up”.

23 This is true of Claude Royet-Journoud, who regards public readings as equivalent to hand-written poems – whereas poetry should imply the neutrality of the written word, as he emphasised when he introduced his reading:

[...] It is not completely without reason that I am reluctant to read out loud.
A book is mute, it is not supposed to be represented by a voice.
If we consider the example of a hand-written poem: when we see it, it is not really

there. Poems need something neutral, like typographical characters. Only then do they have enough neutrality to exist. I tend to believe that poems are for our eyes and our mental space. [...] What stays in our heads when we've read a book?... Regardless, having said all this, I'm still going to read.¹⁶

24 **That French Style**

25 What exactly is a public reading?

26 It is an act performed within the written poem, and, therefore, it is an action.

27 But firstly, the poem itself is an act within discursive sentences and speech.

28 This was demonstrated by Charles Olson and many other American poets, in line with the philosopher John Dewey.

29 As for Boris Pasternak, his argument was surprisingly similar: "Poetry is prose... Prose itself, the voice of prose, prose in action rather than narrated prose."¹⁷

30 Indeed, reading poetry means to situate writing in the realm of action, not narration.

31 Ghérasim Luca's poetry, and Bernard Heidsieck's action/poetry participate in this paradigm. For years, they were rejected by many a French poet. Poetry has long been considered as a possible rupture with narration. A narrative hindered to the point of no longer narrating anything. Many authors feel poetry is opposed to narrativity, that it breaks with prose, which is naturally narrative. Thus, the opposition between poetry and prose becomes a handicap for oral rendering.

32 Whereas Charles Olson spoke of a poem's energy; speaking at Black Mountain College of action and enactment; French poets, on the other hand, insisted on rhythm, following a syllabic logic. The radio poem *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* has mostly been forgotten (except by François Dufrêne, Henri Pichette and Maurice Roche). In fact, until the 1970s, no one even knew where the tape of the recording was. John Cage, Mary C. Richards and Charles Olson, at Black Mountain, were those who understood Antonin Artaud best.

33 Moreover, many people – although they are increasingly rare –, who have remained fixated on the culture of theatre – the main reference when it comes to the art of speech – declare for that very reason that poets are bad readers. This is no longer the case, since more and more reading spaces have opened.

34 The cultural influence of popular novels on French poetry must also be mentioned. They were at first serialised in tabloids, and their hegemonic component is, essentially, printed, and therefore visual. In his famous essay *The Storyteller*, which he wrote in Paris in 1936, Walter Benjamin notes the disappearance of orality in literature.

Novels could only start to spread once printing had been invented. Oral traditions – the legacy of the epic genre – are differently constituted from the basis of the novel. What opposes the novel to every other kind of prose, and above all, to story-telling [*Erzählung*], is that it does not originate in oral tradition and that it will never join it.

35 When Benjamin mentions fairy tales, he is also alluding to poetry. It is worth mentioning that he is the author of seventy sonnets that were strangely forgotten, until Giorgio Agamben unearthed them in 1981.

36 **Archivists and the Others**

37 Blaise Gautier was not only the founder and director of a major public reading space. His innovative visual art skills doubtlessly attracted his attention to the fact that the

Centre Georges Pompidou's programme was defined as including painting, sculpture, music, and, interestingly, reading. Of course, this referred to the wonderful Bibliothèque publique d'information [Public Information Library]. And to books in general, of which the poetic arts represent an infinitesimal part.

- 38 Blaise Gautier occupied the Centre Georges Pompidou's basement. From 1977 onwards, he created the appropriate technical conditions for a continuous programme of poetry readings and performances, as well as for quality recordings of every session. Shortly before his death in 1992, aware of the extraordinary nature of this legacy, he had part of the analogue archives transferred onto digital media. This made it possible for some guest poets to use voices from the archives to enhance or accompany their own readings.
- 39 At the Lyon public library, I humbly implemented a systematic video recording procedure. The videos could then be accessed by the library's visitors. The task of conservation was thereby carried out.
- 40 But this certainly does not mean that the archives are available now, as, following the swing of the pendulum which is so characteristic of some administrations – is this poetic justice? – most of them are now, if they have not disappeared, vegetating in librarian limbo. This is what the public events service manager wrote to me a few weeks ago: “Concerning your [sic] recordings, many of them are on VHS tape and there has been no real interest on the part of management or the literature department to preserve or digitise them.”
- 41 Others, who organised poetic arts festivals, such as Vincent Barras in Geneva, have kept numerous audio recordings on analogue media, without knowing how to preserve what is currently regarded as a treasure by specialists, but which will doubtless one day become part of our shared heritage.
- 42 In an era where everything is preserved in a disorderly fashion, and most often condemned to technological obsolescence, the time has finally come to question the preservation of these precious reading voices, of their possible dissemination, and, in a broader sense, to consider the creation of a website hosted by a durable institution, such as PennSound, that would collect and restore all the recordings made in contexts that were often precarious and non-profit. This would allow researchers to access them, as they now use public reading recordings as a tool for analysing and investigating poetic works, in particular through a sensorial approach.
- 43 It was with this in mind that Abigail Lang and I contacted Patrick Bazin, who was the then-director of the Bibliothèque publique d'information [Bpi]. Here is his answer:
- I have just read your letter, in which you outline your project for creating an audio archive dedicated to contemporary poetry that could involve the Bpi.
- However, I must clarify that although the Bpi is a national institution, it does not have a heritage conservation mission, like the BnF [Bibliothèque nationale de France] or the BmL [Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon] do. The recordings and digitising it undertakes only concern its own cultural events. In other words, except for the latter, it neither has the intention nor the means to create a digital archive.
- Therefore, I believe I cannot be very useful to you, although your idea seems very relevant.¹⁸
- 44 In 1961, Joseph Beuys made a drawing entitled *Feuerstelle*, which was included in the same block as *Die Stimme*. It is the visual transcription of an action he performed in nature, a lecture given in the middle of the forest, addressed to the trees, with no

witnesses. Of course, no picture was taken by Beuys at the time. The only information we have is his three line-long comment. Much later, the drawing constituted the matrix of an installation he exhibited at the Basel Kunstmuseum, connected to the city's carnival: *Feueurstätte 2*. Without Beuys's fragile 1961 drawing, without his delicate ulterior words, it is quite difficult for the uninitiated to understand the genesis of this major work, and to understand its artistic strength.

- 45 Similarly, without the voices reading the works of poets since – say – 1975, without them being located, gathered, preserved, digitised, restored, archived, indexed and classified, without them being at long last made available to the public, a fundamental fact emerging from sensorial experience will be increasingly missed. We will seldom seize – perhaps never again – that particular alchemy through which authors extract, as much as they abstract from within their bodies, that inchoate state inherent to what they are seeking when they write, which they then turn inside out like a glove; so that the pocket of air opens to others. To be shared.
- 46 This is a link in the chain that grants access to the enigma particular to each poem and each author, and which has been neglected up until now in France, in comparison to the situation in the USA or Germany.

NOTES

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18. Letter from 20th February, 2013
2. Trocmé, Florence. « Les Entretiens infinis » 2, *Poezibau*, 2007, <https://poezibao.typepad.com/poezibao/2008/01/les-entretien-1.html>
3. « Introduction », *Archives de la poésie sonore*, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2020, p. 11-12. Sous la dir. d'Abigail Lang, Michel Murat et Céline Pardo
4. Beurard-Valdoye, Patrick. *Le Narré des îles Schwitters*, Dijon : Les presses du réel ; Marseille : Transbordeurs, Al Dante, 2007
5. Trocmé, Florence. « Les Entretiens infinis » 3, *Poezibau*, 2007, <https://poezibao.typepad.com/poezibao/2008/01/les-entretien-3.html>
6. Beurard-Valdoye, Patrick. « L'archive a besoin des arts poétiques », *Archives sonores de la poésie*, op. cit., p. 77

7. « Introduction », *Archives de la poésie sonore*, *op. cit.*, p. 10
8. Trocmé, Florence. “Les Entretiens infinis” 2, *Poezibau*, 2007, <https://poezibao.typepad.com/poezibao/2008/01/les-entretien-1.html>
9. “Introduction”, *Archives de la poésie sonore*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2020, p. 11-12. Ed. by Abigail Lang, Michel Murat and Céline Pardo
10. Beurard-Valdoye, Patrick. *Le Narré des îles Schwitters*, Dijon : Les presses du réel ; Marseille : Transbordeurs, Al Dante, 2007
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13. “Introduction”, *Archives de la poésie sonore*, *op. cit.*, p. 10