

Les Archives sonores de la poésie

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The spread of new sound recording technologies at the end of the 19th Century has modified our perception but also our use of spoken and written language. It has signified the end of print, that is of visually remediated language, as the hegemonic way of saving, storing, retrieving and transmitting language while announcing a new era of reborn orality. Oral language is now more present than ever and the kind of direct, face to face, physically embodied communication that it supposes is no longer culturally and ideologically dominated by the written model of distant and delayed communication with an absent author. Poets rapidly became aware of these new possibilities. Yet in spite of the glowing commitment of modernist poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire, an early defender of the new media poetry of his times and in spite of some attempts to constitute sound archives in view of scientific research or the involvement of writers and poets in radio broadcasting, the real and systematic exploitation of sound technology in poetry did not start before the 1950s, in the double context of the revival of public readings and the larger availability of personal tape recorders. In the beginning the renewed encounter between poetry and sound technology still remained rather “passive” (the technology was mainly used to record and archive), but after some years its use became more “active” (the technology started to be used as a creative tool, transforming the way in which poetry was made and performed). In the end, it is poetry as a whole that will be radically changed: one shifts from “writing” poetry to “doing” or “performing” poetry, making room for what had been repressed for so many centuries, namely orality.

In the Anglo-Saxon scholarly tradition, the study of this reborn orality in poetry has taken to forms, theoretically very different, in practice closely intertwined. The first one is that of the systematic building of specialized archives, with UbuWeb and PennSound as the flagship realizations of a wide and generally well-organized open access policy at various levels. The second form is that of the elaboration of a specific theory of what is meant by sound in poetry, beyond the traditional rhetorical concepts of prosody and rhythm. The key feature of this new theory is the distinction between “orality” (referring to the way in which a written text is orally performed) and “aurality” (referring to the way in which a text is capable of producing sound effects, however different they may be from what can be heard during a normal “declamation”). Today, both poetic practice and the scientific study of poetry heavily tend to prioritize “aurality” at the expense of “orality”, generally accused of remaining text-bound. “Aurality”, instead, is considered a way of liberating the full spectrum of sound aspects, including those that were longtime seen as marginal if not utterly futile (either “non meaningful” aspects such as stottering or inaudibility (sic) during a performance or “external” such as the impact of a microphone, echoes, surround noises during a recording, etc.). In short, what “aurality” imposes, beyond the human, now mechanically enhanced voice, is the very *body* of the poet, now seen as a fundamental feature of any poetic production as well as reception.

Two landmark publications still dominate the Anglo-Saxon field: *Close Listening*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford UP, 1998) and *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, eds. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago UP, 2009). In France, and in spite of a thriving experimental sound poetry tradition, the methodical study of this type of poetry has remained much more fragmentary while the encyclopedic or archival impulse of initiatives such as UbuWeb and PennSound was also much more modest. The volume edited by Lang, Murat, and Pardo, all three of them scholars with an impressive track record in the field of sound analysis in poetry, has to ambition to fill this gap and it succeeds in doing so in a wonderful way. The quality and diversity of the essays gathered in this collection are without a doubt outstanding and the sum of the parts should be considered the ideal platform to finally structure and reshape the until now shattered and very incomplete study of sound in poetry. In that sense, the book continues and systematizes the

equally excellent volume *Dire la poésie*, ed. Jean-François Puff (Cécile Defaut publ. 2015; it does of course not come as a surprise that several authors of this publication also appear in the current collection).

The book opens with two “foundational texts”, the (excellent) translation of Bernstein’s introduction to *Close Listening* and a carefully edited text on the aesthetics of declamation by a lesser-known representative of the Russian Formalist school, Serguei Ignatievitch Bernstein (no relative of the first Bernstein). It further offers contributions by 14 authors (many of them, such as Vincent Broqua, fruitfully combining the nowadays no longer separated roles of creator and scholar) in three different sections. A historical section on the emergence and progressive use of sound technology in a poetic and institutional milieu that was not a priori in favor of this kind of experiments (articles by Patrick Beurard-Valdoye, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Daniel Kane, Heiata Julienne and Gaëlle Théval). A section focusing on the reception and study of performing and listening practices, by authors and theorists alike, of these new archives (articles by Jean-François Puff, Will Montgomery, Olivier Brossard and Michel Murat). And a third section that explores the possible uses, and thus manipulations and transformations, in short, for instance in the context of an exhibition (articles by Chris Mustazza, Vincent Broqua, Anne-Christine Royère and Camille Bloomfield).

What makes this collection so important is not only the theoretical update of the work done in the field since more than two decades, but also the opening of this field to all types of poetry (in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, there has been for many years a strong emphasis on highly experimental poetry, somewhat at the expense of more classic forms of poetry). *Les Archives sonores de la poésie* also introduces a very helpful matter of fact approach in terms of do’s and don’ts, for instance when it comes down to questions such as: Which metadata do we need when describing an archival sound item? What is the difference between presenting and exhibiting an archive? How should we think about the relationship between sound in poetry and what the visual captures of a performance are capable of telling us? How can we reconstruct the historical horizon of producing as well as listening? What to do when items are missing? Another great merit of this book is the strong sense of self-criticism. The collection is truly committed, but never one-sided. The authors do acknowledge the resistance of large parts of the poetic field to “aurality”, but they do not discard this a purely reactionary. They also stress the limitations and dead ends of certain forms of contemporary research, but this does not lead them to easy skepticism (for instance when discussing computer-enhanced listening or distant reading). Finally, the book tries to catch up with the Anglo-Saxon research in the field, but it also clearly foregrounds the interest of French best practices (and failures, of course).

Les Archives sonores de la poésie is a vital contribution to the study of sound and more generally speaking the body in all kinds of poetry. It is also a performative contribution, since the book will certainly have strong impact on official policy in the field of sound archives. It is, in short, the ideal springboard for a widening as well as sharpening of both poetry and the study of poetry in the expanded media field.