

Balz Engler, *Reading and Listening: The Modes of Communicating Poetry and their Influence on the Texts*. Berne: Francke, 1982, chapter 5: Aural Poetry, 38-44

5. Aural Poetry

The complaint that people are unable to read a text aloud, so often made of today's students, is not new. In an essay published in 1904, H. W. Boynton writes:

Many persons never lose the sense of literature as printed speech, and consequently read a book aloud almost as fast as they read it to themselves. They would like to read it quite as fast, and their attempt results in that hurrying monotone which is characteristic of most family reading. The voice is not really called upon to exert itself intelligently. It is merely made use of to suggest print; an odd retaliation of the eye.

The textual evidence collected in the previous two chapters may have justified my distinction between aural and visual poetry, but since none of that evidence excludes visual experience, and only some of it suggests aural experience, it offers us little help in directly tackling the problem described by Boynton.

This problem consists in the failure to distinguish clearly the events of which aural and visual literature form part, i. e. in a lack of awareness of what characterizes them. In the next two chapters I shall therefore approach my topic from a different angle. Instead of singling out the printed text, I shall start from the *event*, and its effects on the poetic text. I shall again distinguish two events: listening to poetry, which is the subject of this chapter, and reading poetry on the page, which is dealt with in chapter 6.

In the discussion of listening to poetry, I shall concentrate on two closely related aspects of the event: the relationship between the audience and the text, and the relationship between the audience and the performer. I

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shall try to show how these relationships are reflected in the printed text.

It is a basic characteristic of listening, not only to poetry, that the words following each other in time are not recoverable. The listener cannot turn back to the page and re-read a difficult passage nor can he interrupt the performer and ask questions.

In some cases, the audience may share the knowledge of the poetic text, or some of its elements. It may even be expected to join in the performance, repeating refrains, or clapping hands. While such participation is common with orally transmitted texts - folk songs, ballads, etc. - it is rare with literate poetry. Here, we normally find a polarization of participants in the event: a performer, who is familiar with the text, and listeners, for whom it is usually something new.

The problem is, then, as Yeats puts it in his essay "Poetry and the Living Voice," that the audience must either "understand swiftly or not at all." If one listens to a poem for the first time it is not possible to make as much of it as detailed critical analysis does. The audition must, however, work as an experience: it must raise expectations and fulfil them. There must not be any loose ends. In order to achieve this, no grammatical or semantic obscurities or unresolvable contradictions can remain at the end unless the listener is expected to ascribe a function to them, e. g., they may mirror the mystery or chaos of the world presented in the text.

As a rule, therefore, sentences will be neither very long nor syntactically complex. The repetition of words and phrases, and of terms and turns related in meaning will ensure that there is enough semantic redundancy for the text to be apprehended as its performance proceeds. Ambiguities whose presence is not indicated by the verbal context or by the event in which the poem is experienced will

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simply remain unnoticed. As a result the complex ambiguities cherished by William Empson and his followers* have no place in an aural experience of poetry (see below, pp. 85-87).

The beginning and end of the text have to be clearly marked in performance. Often the text will be preceded by a short introduction, which relates the performer to the audience, and both to the text. This introduction will contrast with the poem in that the performer extemporizes it, and addresses his words to the audience directly. They are *about* the poem. Its origin may be indicated, difficult words and images may be explained. The transition to the text, song or speech, will be marked by mentioning the title and making a short pause, or by a musical induction. Often the beginning is also marked in the text: the introduction of characters, even an invocation to the Muse, also serve to attract the attention of an audience.

By contrast, the end of the text cannot be indicated by external means: the performer does not ordinarily stop singing or speaking and walk away. Instead, he may suggest the approaching ending with his voice; and the text itself will also indicate or refer to closure.

We cannot go much farther in discussing the audience-text relationship without making additional distinctions. The most important distinction is between song, where the words and the tune are fitted to each other, and spoken poetry.

With song, the music dominates the performance of the text. The singer has to follow the tune, and to adapt to those who may be accompanying him on instruments; there will be moments when the singer is silent and the music is playing. As V. C.

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Clinton-Baddeley, summarizing the views of many other critics, has observed:

Words for music are incomplete words. They represent, and are intended to represent, an incomplete thought. The finished words of a song are only half a song. Within the limits of its technique the words can attain perfection - but it is the essential quality of that technique that the words presuppose, demand, and await the addition of music.

There are two points here with which one may quarrel. One would prefer a different term for *thought*, e. g., *being* or *existence*; and the opposition should not be, as it is here suggested, between complete and incomplete texts, but between two types of incomplete texts - one demanding the addition of the speaking voice, the other that of the singing voice and music.

Otherwise, Clinton-Baddeley gives a fairly accurate account of how the text functions in song. Not only are the words incomplete without the tune. The music dominates the words. The musical phrasing requires that the metrical units of the text be shorter and more varied in length than in texts intended to be spoken. The tune encourages repetition, of metrical patterns, in the form of stanzas, but also of lines and verbal phrases in refrains. These repetitions curb the force of the forward drive in a text; and they continually juxtapose the movement of language to constant elements. There can be little doubt, for example, that much of the effect of tragic inevitability in ballads results from the juxtaposition of narrative to stanza and refrain patterns.

The tune also affects the single line. It determines its rhythmical organization, and makes it difficult, therefore, to accentuate particular words in performance, as it is possible in speech-verse; nor can intonation and change of tempo be used for this purpose.

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For all these reasons the text of a song will, in addition to showing certain structural characteristics, usually be simple in vocabulary, syntax, meaning, and mood, though it need not be as simple as alleged in a remark Addison reports: "Nothing is capable of being well set to Musick, that is not Nonsense."

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the texts of songs make for a somewhat monotonous experience when they are read out, and even more so, when they are read in a book, even though refrains are, as a rule, only printed once. Obviously reading the refrain only once is not the way the text was meant to be experienced. Reading only what is printed of *Auld Lang Syne* in the *New Oxford Book of English Verse*, without the repeats, and considering this experience adequate, is a good illustration of how the two different types of poetic events can be confused (see above, pp. 24-26).

On the other hand, adding music to a good speech-text, is, in Valery's words, "like using a stained-glass window to light a painted picture." Song-texts and speech-texts are part of different situations, and they reflect different types of incompleteness.

Lacking the constraints of a tune, speech-texts are free to follow other rules. Without the musical phrase to determine the length of lines in time, the poet can use other metrical forms emphasizing narrative flow, for example, like line-units containing an equal number of stressed syllables; or uniform metrical units may be given up completely, as in free verse. Instead of the repetition of verbal phrases, as suggested by that of musical phrases, single sounds may be repeated, and create a music of their own in alliteration and assonance. The music, along with its structural functions, is, as it were, absorbed by the words.

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In the less rigid frame of speech-verse, it is easier to convey complex meanings. Stress is no longer tied to metre as it tends to be in song. Rhythm may therefore follow the shapes of informal speech and create various types of emphasis. Pauses may be introduced, the speed may be varied*, and, above all, speech-intonation may be fully exploited. The ability to convey complex meanings, however, is limited by the need of the audience to "understand swiftly or not at all." This demands an orderly progression of thought, with all the restrictions this implies; and syntactical and semantic relations in the text must be explicit*.

Because of its logical structure, because of its association with informal speech, and because there are fewer phrases whose repetition lead the text back to a constant point of reference - for all these reasons speech-verse will be more directional than song. Because it tends to lead forward, it favours narrative* and argumentative texts. It is able to create and release suspense and semantic tension - indeed, the witty, often satirical, *pointe* is probably one of the most striking effects typical of speech-verse.

The relationship between the audience and the speaker is also affected by the characteristics of speech-verse. All those elements of speech that have to be given up to the tune, but can freely be used in speech - rhythm, tempo, and intonation - also express personality. In speech-texts we often hear an individual speaking, and such texts may therefore deal with subjects that are closed to song. Song is able to deal with typical emotions and situations, like the grief of a forsaken lover, or joy about Christ's birth, but only speech-verse can describe Wordsworth's experience when rowing on the lake at night (in Book I of *The Prelude*), or Keats's emotions when first looking into Chapman's Homer.

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The extent to which a text is personal depends on the event for which the poet has intended it. Aural poetry will always be part of an event that is of some social or religious significance to its participants. It is no surprise that certain types of text are closely linked to particular occasions in life cycles. We may think of epithalamiums and funeral odes, or of carols and nursery rhymes. In many cases these texts will themselves help to create events, as in the feasts described in *Beowulf*, in the homely evenings mentioned in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*, when her brother read his latest poems to her while she was mending clothes, or in the choruses that resounded in Canterbury Cathedral when T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* was first performed. The event that probably first comes to mind nowadays is the public poetry reading.

Two factors in particular shape such an event: the poet's attitude - expressed, or inferred by his critics - towards his audience and its size. Wordsworth has these factors in mind when he requires, in the "Preface to the Edition of 1815" of his poems, "nothing more than an animated or impassioned recitation" for his poems, a demand that agrees with his claim that they are written "in a selection of language really used by men." The texts are meant to communicate between a speaker and an audience with which he is on intimate terms. He is always able to adapt his speed, rhythm, and intonation to the reactions he senses in his listeners.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, on the other hand, represents the classicist position that "the manner in which poetry is offered to the ear, the tone in which it is recited, should be as far removed from the tone of conversation, as the words of which that poetry is composed."

We find a related, but much subtler attitude to the text in Yvor Winters's essay "On the Audible Reading of Poetry" where for once

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he is probably in agreement with most critics of his generation:

A poem calls for a formal reading, partly because the poem is of its own nature a formal statement, and partly because only such a reading will render the rhythm with precision. Furthermore, it is only with a formal tone as a basis that variations of tone within the poem can be rendered with precision: without such a formal tone to unify the poem, the poem becomes merely a loose assortment of details.

The poem, as a statement and as a structure of sounds, is perfect in itself, and the task of performance can only be to make this perfection audible. The reading celebrates the inherent qualities of the poem. As all good poetic texts share this perfection, no matter when they were written, they also demand the same kind of reading.

The kind of reading which I defend is equally appropriate to a song by Campion or to an epic by Milton. Any poem which cannot endure the impersonal illumination of such a reading or which requires the assistance, whether expert or clumsy, of shouting, whispering, or other dramatic improvement, is to that extent bad poetry ...

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The characteristics of the individual voice - its rhythm, and especially its intonation - should leave no trace in the performance. Rhythm and intonation will therefore be formalized. As Winters himself concludes, "a formal reading ... will necessarily take on something of the nature of a chant."

The same effect of separating poetry from ordinary speech may also be achieved if a text is spoken without any intonational variations. Because, in Francis Berry's

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words, "a poem pronounced without intonation or melody only can have an effect as 'purposed negative,'" this may help to stress the distance between communicative speech and the language of the poem. This way of reading may go even farther than the one defended by Winters, by suggesting that the voice *qua* voice - personal or impersonal - disturbs the perfection of the poem (see below, p. 90).

Finally, the size of the audience influences the event and is reflected in the text. This may be illustrated by two extreme examples, texts written for very different events. Between the two, most other events can be placed. The first is a text meant to be spoken by a chorus and to be addressed to a large audience in a vast hall. Both factors make the text impersonal, and both are reflected in the text. The women of Canterbury in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* speak lines like these:

Since golden October declined into
sombre November

And the apples were gathered and
stored and the land became

brown sharp points of death in a waste
of water and mud,

The New Year waits, breathes, waits,
whispers in darkness.

In order to be understood, such a text must be simple* in wording and syntax, similar to song. Its rhythm must allow for slow speaking. But here, as rarely in song, distinct rhythmical effects (cp. "bròwn shàrp pòints of death") and sound effects (cp. "sombre November", "apples were gathered", "waste of water") are important in shaping the experience.

At the opposite extreme we find ways of reading poetry aloud that are possible with electronic media. Here the distance from reader to hearer may be only a few feet, but

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the reader can nonetheless be invisible. He is therefore able, according to Francis Berry, to give a performance of "some intensely private lyrics (where the writer seems to be speaking from within his last reserves)." On the other hand, this kind of performance is not suited to poetry "where inward resonance and outward reverberation is substantive." In other words, the texts must not only be private, they require a certain speed and, at the same time, concentration, that is, they have to be "intense."

Of all the events discussed in this chapter, this is the one closest to reading a book - the event that will be the subject of the next chapter.