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LITERATURE AND SOUND

Justin St. Clair

From orality to aurality

In “Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works,” British novelist Tom McCarthy insists that literature is governed by an “acoustic logic” (McCarthy 2012).

My aim here, in this essay, is not to *tell* you something, but to make you *listen*: not to me, nor even to Beckett and Kafka, but to a set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace of the novel, poem, play – in their lines, between them and around them – since each of these forms began. I want to make you listen to them, in the hope not that they’ll deliver up some hidden and decisive message, but rather that they’ll help attune your ear to the very pitch and frequency of its own activity – in other words, that they’ll enable you to listen in on listening itself.

(McCarthy 2012)

Literature, McCarthy contends, is constitutionally dependent on the act of listening: its transmission has always been predicated on repetition, and iterative composition “consists first and foremost of listening” (McCarthy 2012). McCarthy’s proposition, while emphatic, is by no means radical. In fact, notions of literary aurality have been repeating, pulsing, and modulating in the critical airspace – to echo McCarthy’s formulation – for centuries. And while some of McCarthy’s particulars may be dependent on poststructuralist ideas regarding intertextuality and the role of the author (that is: the author as arranger, composer, or re-broadcaster, as opposed to Almighty Creator), the centrality of sound to the study of literature is commonsensically apparent. Assonance, consonance, dissonance, alliteration, meter, modulation, and rhyme scheme are all foundational – and fundamentally sonic – poetic devices. Much word play, moreover, from punning substitution to playful metathesis, depends upon phonological sounding. Whatever one may think of print-oriented bastardry, literature is inescapably an aural art.

A significant portion of literature’s aurality certainly derives from ancient orality. The earliest narrative traditions were undeniably oral, and transmission, therefore, depended upon cultures of close listening. Within literary criticism, the most significant figure to consider the legacy of orality in the contemporary era is Walter Ong, whose *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) found adherents across disciplines. Ong, of course, is by no means uncontroversial.

In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003), Jonathan Sterne sharply criticizes Ong's theological underpinnings, arguing that however "sophisticated and iconoclastic" his Catholicism, Ong's formulations reinforce metaphysical prejudices regarding the senses that have dogged the Western philosophical tradition for centuries – from the supposed "interiority" of aurality to the persistent notion that the senses are somehow "a zero-sum game, where the dominance of one sense by necessity leads to the decline of another sense" (Sterne 2003: 16, 17). While I'm more than inclined to side with Sterne, his critique does not entirely negate several of Ong's salient observations. Foremost among these, perhaps, is an idea he lifted from Eric Havelock (1963): an insistence on the importance of aural mnemonics to oral cultures.

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions, or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic or other formulaic expressions, . . . in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax.

(Ong 1982: 34)

Whether or not one subscribes to Ong's conception of a technologically induced "secondary orality," contemporary literature – and poetry in particular – has inherited the aural legacy of patterned, acoustic mnemonics. While interest in prosody, once a mainstay of literary criticism, has waned of late, the study of sound in poetry continues to receive important attention. Over the past several decades, a number of influential essay collections have appeared, including Adelaide Morris's *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (1997), Charles Bernstein's *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), and Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin's *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (2009).

If Ong's contributions to literary studies amplified the importance of aurality, the deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida pulled the discipline in a different direction. In *Of Grammatology* (1967, translated 1976), Derrida decries the logocentrism of Western metaphysics, which, in his estimation, has always privileged the aurality of speech over the visibility of writing. "In every case," writes Derrida, "the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing" (Derrida 1976: 11). Consequently, he continues, within the Western philosophical tradition, "[a]ll signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself" (Derrida 1976: 11). Derridean deconstruction, then, "can be read as an inversion of Ong's value system" (Sterne 2003: 17): not only does Derrida reject the ecclesiastical substructures of traditional criticism, but he also repudiates the notion that writing is essentially a secondary or derivative linguistic endeavor. In an era in which the literarily inclined – both artists and academics alike – felt increasingly marginalized, this theoretical valorization proved immensely satisfying. Aurality, in some senses, was but collateral damage.

Within literary criticism, Garrett Stewart can be credited, at least in part, with recuperating aurality in the face of "Derrida's frontal assault on the primacy of voice in language" (Stewart 1990: 103). In *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (1990), Stewart develops a sophisticated theorization of the aural mechanics of reading as he attempts "to give theory back to literature by giving literature back to language" (Stewart 1990: 34). While poststructuralist criticism

“might well seem to render any reading-with-the-ear a theoretically groundless pastime,” Stewart responds by reconceptualizing voice as “not centered and authorial but, rather, textual, receptive” (Stewart 1990: 103). Essential to Stewart’s hypothesis is the notion that so-called silent reading is never truly silent. Instead, he argues, reading is an embodied, somatic act: even when reading “quietly” to ourselves, we nonetheless engage in phonemic reading, internally evocalizing the text. The phonotext, in other words, *sounds* – even when our reading is inaudible to others.

This recognition of reading’s inherent aurality better enabled literary scholars to consider what Stewart calls “a ‘dyslocutionary’ tension between phonemic and graphemic signification” (Stewart 1990: 5). In other words, what is silently evocalized during the embodied act of reading does not *always* correspond to that which is inscribed on the page. “The phonic,” as Stewart puts it, “will not hold fast within the graphic. Or, more to the point, the phonemic will not stay put within the morphemes apparently assigned by the script” (Stewart 1990: 4–5). As every child knows, “I scream” and “ice cream” are all-but-indistinguishable when uttered aloud, and this sort of playful homophony – intentionality notwithstanding – is endemic to reading. Many phonemic soundings that fail to correspond to their graphic counterparts we simply ignore, perhaps even unconsciously. Others, however, we assimilate into our attempts at meaning-making, particularly when processing what we take to be “literary” texts. Even inexperienced readers, for example, when given Gertrude Stein’s “Susie Asado,” will hear “sweetie” when their eyes encounter “sweet tea.” So how do we read? “The answer,” Stewart insists in *Reading Voices*, “is obvious enough to elude most literary study: we listen while we read” (Stewart 1990: 37).

Acousmatic listening and audio transcription

If, historically speaking, the “how” of reading has been somewhat underappreciated in literary studies, the “where” of reading has also long been, as Stewart puts it, an “alien question” (Stewart 1990: 1). His persuasive answer is to postulate “the reading body”: a “somatic locus of soundless reception” that not only “includes ... the brain but” also “the organs of vocal production, from diaphragm up through throat to tongue and palate” (Stewart 1990: 1). But while an account of reading’s there-ness – or, if you will, an a-where-ness of the somato-acoustic nature of literary reception – has come relatively recently to the discipline, larger locative questions have persisted for centuries. Often these have been subsumed in debates over presence, representation, authenticity, or authorial intent, all of which seem somewhat foolish in the wake of literary poststructuralism. Regardless, the relationship between literature and sound is fundamentally dislocatory: the “there” of textuality is necessarily at a remove from whatever soundscape a specific passage records, and time only amplifies the disjunction. Literature, in other words, is inherently acousmatic.

In *Treatise on Musical Objects* (1966), Pierre Schaeffer asserts the importance of acousmatic listening. He takes as his point of departure the tale of Pythagoras lecturing from behind a curtain to acolytes who, deprived of their master’s image, could only attend to the sound of his voice. Sound “that one hears without seeing what causes it,” Schaeffer insists, is not only endemic to the age of electronic media, but it also enables a phenomenological approach to sound: “listening itself ... becomes the origin of the phenomenon to be studied” (Schaeffer 2011: 77). It should come as little surprise that this formulation sounds strikingly similar to McCarthy’s assertion that literature allows us “to listen in on listening itself.” Many literary scholars engaged with sound studies regard print as an audio technology, a medium that not only transcribes audio phenomena, but one that also – by very virtue of its acousmatic nature – encourages readers to attend to aurality with critical detachment, listening at a remove from whatever generative

agent might be credited with the initial sounding. In short, print functions much as Schaeffer's tape recorder: "if it creates new phenomena to observe, it creates above all new conditions of observation" (Schaeffer 2011: 81). As Sam Halliday notes in *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (2013), "[t]o fully grasp the significance of sound in modern culture, it follows, we must consider visual cultures of sound and verbal cultures of sound, and see all of these in dialogue with 'sounded' cultures of sound, more self-evidently made out of sound itself" (Halliday 2013: 3). Halliday speaks for many close-listening literary scholars when he observes that

literature ... is especially well suited for revealing sound's "configured" quality, which is, again, sound's imbrication in the non- or trans-acoustic. Correlatively, literature is especially well suited for revealing such para-sonic factors as sound's social connotations, its relationship with other senses, and – perhaps most importantly of all – the qualitative dimension that means certain sounds are actually of interest to people, things they actively seek out or shun.

(Halliday 2013: 12)

At first blush, it all might seem relentlessly paradoxical: (1) literature, read silently, still resounds; (2) its audio transcriptions – graphic, and so, constitutionally mute – decouple sound, nonetheless, from ostensible source; and (3) this literary act, literally an act of de-contextualization, enables the broader contextualization of both sound culture and sound in culture.

Unsurprisingly, many studies of sound in literature acknowledge R. Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* (1977) as a singularly important antecedent. Schafer, whose approach to acousmatic listening is markedly different than Pierre Schaeffer's, refers to "the splitting of sounds from their original contexts" as schizophonia, an unfortunate neologism that deliberately pathologizes acousmatic sound by underscoring its supposed aberrance (Schafer 1994: 88). This, however, is not the basis for his appeal within literary studies. Rather, it is Schafer's insistence on the importance of interdisciplinarity and, in particular, the way he "emphatically relies on literary documents" as evidentiary material (Keskinen 2008: 13). Throughout his groundbreaking study, republished in 1994 as *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, "Schafer calls on literature to testify to his case," a fact that has not gone unnoticed among literary scholars (Keskinen 2008: 13). In *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003), for example, John M. Picker credits Schafer as both inspiration and model, emphasizing that his conceptual innovations (that is, the earwitness: "a literary figure who records the soundscapes of his or her own time and place") have proven both predictive of later scholarly trends and particularly useful to those in narrative studies (Picker 2003: 13).

As Schafer observes, before the advent of mechanical and electro-acoustic recording technologies, literature was the primary approximative means of representing and preserving the sonic environment. "It is a special talent of novelists like Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Mann," he writes, "to have captured the soundscapes of their own places and times, and such descriptions constitute the best guide available in the reconstruction of soundscapes past" (Schafer 1994: 9). The field of literary studies, then, has become an important site for "performing ... a kind of acoustic archaeology on the (ostensibly silent) records of the distant past" (Picker 2003: 14). Bruce R. Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (1999) exemplifies such an approach. In this aural history, Smith uses a preponderance of musical, literary, and historical documents to reconstruct the soundscapes of 16th- and 17th-century England, arguing that acoustemology (that is: knowledge through sounded experience) was integral to the development of early modern subjectivity.

Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* is itself another excellent example of acoustic archeology within literary studies. From Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Picker uses period literary reportage to "investigate the two major roles that hearing played in Victorian culture: as a response to a physical stimulus and as a metaphor for the communication of meaning" (Picker 2003: 7). The result is a compelling cultural history of Victorian listening practice, which

analyzes the stages by which they sought to transform what Romantics had conceived of as a sublime *experience* into a quantifiable and marketable *object* or *thing*, a sonic commodity, in the form of a printed work, a performance, or, ultimately, an audio recording, for that most conspicuous legacy of Victorianism, the modern middle-class consumer.

(Picker 2003: 10)

Literary art in the age of mechano-acoustic reproduction

The advent of phonography and, eventually, what we might half-jestingly call the media-consumerist complex, certainly presented a challenge to literature's cultural position. Most immediately, print lost its monopoly on audio transcription, and literature could no longer be said to represent the only method of recording the soundscapes specific to a particular time and place. However, as Douglas Kahn suggests in *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), the invention and commercialization of mechanical recording technologies need not be read as a supersession, but can instead be understood as occasioning a dynamic state of media co-incidence. "The inscriptive attributes of phonography," he writes, "became coterminous with the legacies of writing, universal alphabets, and languages, as well as other inscriptive practices" (Kahn 1999: 16). In short, most literary scholars respond with skepticism to Friedrich A. Kittler's insistence that "[r]ecord grooves dig the grave of the author" (Kittler 1999: 83). If the author has died, it is for a set of wholly unrelated reasons (that is, a recognition of the intentional fallacy, an acknowledgement of the role that readers play in meaning-making, a poststructuralist privileging of interpretive multiplicity, etc.). Literature itself is alive and well, and media competition has only amplified its potential.

One recent examination of textual aurality in the mechano-acoustic era is Philipp Schweighauser's *The Noises of American Literature, 1890–1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* (2006). In this study, Schweighauser argues that despite the ascendance of other audio media, "literary texts from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century continue to be sites of both the cultural production and the representation of noise" (Schweighauser 2006: 19). Literary scholars, it should be noted, often have a fondness for metaphor (that is, studies of "voice" in literature, for example, are far more likely to be figurative investigations of identity projection than anything to do with aurality). From a purist's perspective, then, Schweighauser might be accused of occasionally falling prey to these tendencies as he toggles between noise as a sonic phenomenon and noise, in a systems-theory sense, as an aspect of information exchange. Nevertheless, he not only grounds many of his observations in sound theory, but he also productively attends to literature's own sonic devices. Notable among these is his notion of the audiograph: "a characterization technique that endows fictional bodies with a set of distinctive acoustic properties designed to position characters with regard to the ensemble of social facts and practices that constitute the fictional world they inhabit" (Schweighauser 2006: 71). Acoustic profiling, Schweighauser contends, is endemic to turn-of-the-century naturalism. He offers the Frank Norris novel *McTeague* (1899) as a prime example, arguing that the components of an

audiograph, which “may range from characters’ accents, dialects, or intonation patterns to the sounds produced by their laughter, snoring, or the acoustic impact of their footsteps,” are fundamentally distinct from other descriptive minutiae “that have no other function than to make the narrative more realistic” (Schweighauser 2006: 71, 73). Ultimately, Schweighauser presents audiographic characterization as one way that literature engages “a long history of discursive struggles that involves the disparagement of the aurality of others as noise” (Schweighauser 2006: 64).

Mikko Keskinen’s *Audio Book: Essays on Sound Technologies in Narrative Fiction* (2008) is another recent work of literary criticism that “deals with the ways in which the auditory – voices, sounds, noises – is represented in postphonograph narrative fiction” (Keskinen 2008: 1). Much like Schweighauser, Keskinen insists that “[l]iterature both reproduces and produces acoustical data, both represents and presents sounds” (Keskinen 2008: 5). Keskinen, however, places much of his emphasis on remediation, demonstrating that literature not only “can represent but also utilize in various ways – on levels such as diction, tropes, or narrative structure – the characteristics of . . . sound technologies” (Keskinen 2008: 5). While Schweighauser organizes his book around literary movements, then, Keskinen constructs his around “technologies enabling the transmission or storing of sound,” including the telephone, radio, vinyl records, and magnetic tape (Keskinen 2008: 1). Keskinen’s source material is eclectic, and, as its subtitle suggests, *Audio Book* is a collection of individual essays rather than a single, sustained argument. Such diversity, however, demonstrates the breadth of literature’s formal engagement with other audio technologies, from Nicholson Baker’s telephonic narrative structure in *Vox* (1993) to Nick Hornby’s topological use of musical recording formats in *High Fidelity* (1995).

In my own study, *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature: Novel Listening* (2013), I follow Keskinen’s lead in attending to the remediative tendencies of literary fiction. For example, both Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (1999) and William Gaddis’s *J R* (1993), I argue, formally remediate player piano rolls by incorporating textual lacunae. In Vonnegut’s case, these take the form of “punchhole-replicating, dialogue-squelching em dashes,” while Gaddis deploys ellipses as his perforator of choice (St. Clair 2013: 41). Literary engagement with nineteenth- and twentieth-century sound media, however, is not limited to the replication of formal attributes. In fact, I offer that postwar American fiction has something of an aural fixation, and that heterophonia (or: a pluralism of sound) is one of the key characteristics of the postmodern novel. Not only does such fiction record the aural complexities of the broader postwar mediascape, but it also retransmits a variety of circulating narratives concerning the cultural effects of sound media. In particular, the postmodern novel takes a special interest in background sound, suggesting that unconsidered audio – from patriotic piano ditties to mood-altering elevator music – has the potential to manipulate on a mass scale. When Vonnegut and Gaddis remediate piano rolls, then, it is part of a larger effort to bring under-attended audio streams to the foreground. As a result, my project is organized around four audio technologies capable of providing background sound: the player piano, radio, television audio, and Muzak installations. All four appear repeatedly in postmodern fiction, often figuring as vehicles for either the persuasion or the ventriloquism of the masses. While impact narratives regarding aural influence might strike the contemporary media scholar as overly simplistic, these ideas nonetheless proved quite seductive to literary practitioners worried, as they were, about the place of print in an increasingly competitive cultural marketplace. In short, literary concerns regarding the power of sound not only serve, synecdochically, as an echo of larger media anxieties, but they also allow print fiction to steal, remediatively, a bit of the competition’s thunder. A dialectical engagement with media aurality, then – a simultaneous impulse to repudiate and to utilize – is often the central mechanism of heterophonic postmodernism.

Carter Mathes takes something of a different tack in *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights* (2015). Rather than exploring how print fiction responds to mass-cultural sound media, Mathes investigates how African American literature attempts to leverage the countercultural potential of sound. In black writing of the postwar period, he contends, sound proliferates expressly because it “reconstitutes the political along frequencies outside of ocularcentric authoritarian containment” (Mathes 2015: 3). Using music as his point of departure, Mathes moves from the experimentation and improvisation of free jazz through the politicized literary output of the Black Arts Movement. Ultimately, he argues,

[s]ound functions in African American literary discourse as a means of historical perception and critique, and also as a formalized ‘weapon of theory’ animating literary representations to suggest levels of black cultural meaning largely imperceptible to the visual registers through which race is constantly being configured in the United States.
(Mathes 2015: 13)

Digital directions

If the advent of phonography and the development of media technologies over the course of the twentieth century presented the literary world with both challenges and opportunities, the digital advances of the early twenty-first century have certainly continued the trend. From its very inception, phonographic transcription was considered both a complement to and a replacement for print. “No sooner ... was [it] invented,” notes Matthew Rubery in *Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies* (2011), than “the phonograph was put to use for literary ends, capturing the verse of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning” (Rubery 2011: 1). In fact, “many of Edison’s contemporaries assumed that the phonograph would lead to the end of the printed book altogether” (Rubery 2013: 218). Perhaps most surprising in retrospect, however, is how unsentimental the Victorians were when it came to prognosticating the demise of print. This enthusiastic take on the possibilities of emerging phonographic technologies reflected not only “a culture already steeped in oral performance,” but also a conviction that audio recordings might help “to democratize the book” (Rubery 2013: 228, 230). In addition, “even before the phonograph materialized as a real artifact, there was already a well-developed Victorian yearning for a technology that would make the reading experience more immediate, that would, in a sense, capture the character and subjectivity of an author without the mediation of the printed page” (Camlot 2003: 148). Victorian futurists were, of course, no more accurate in foreseeing the end of print than Edison was in 1888, when he optimistically insisted he could “put the whole of *Nicholas Nickleby* in phonogram form” onto four eight-inch cylinders (Edison 1888: 646–647). It was not until decades later – the 1930s, in fact – that “the development of the slow-speed, close-grooved record capable of playing for at least twenty minutes made it possible to record longer narratives” (Rubery 2011: 5).

The inevitable march toward miniaturization finally did facilitate full-length talking books. The LP era saw a significant uptick in literary audio, from standalone recitational records (for example, Dylan Thomas’s surprisingly popular Caedmon recordings in the 1950s) to hybrid multimedia products (for example, the CBS Legacy Collection’s series of soundtracked coffee-table books in the 1960s, which included titles such as *The Bullfight: A Photographic Narrative with Text* by Norman Mailer [1967]). It was the portability of the cassette tape, however, that really began to shift the paradigm. Clam-shelled sets of audiocassettes became a public library staple in the 1980s, and consumers could suddenly get their books on the go, be it via a Walkman on a

weekend ramble or the car stereo during the daily commute. The CD revolution of the 1990s only increased the audience of listening readers, and, as the relatively cumbersome physical formats of the twentieth century gave way to the all-digital iterations of the early twenty-first (from mp3s to various streaming services), the audiobook began to assert itself as an important mode of literary transmission. Without a doubt, “[i]mproved ease of use is one reason why listening to audiobooks is among the minority of reading practices found to be increasing in popularity as the number of overall readers continues to decline” (Rubery 2011: 9). According to the Audio Publishers Association, “audiobook sales in 2014 totaled more than \$1.47 billion,” a growth of 13.5% over the previous year (APA 2015). (As a somewhat startling point of comparison: if audiobooks were a country, its GDP would rank somewhere between Djibouti and Belize.)

The audiobook, then, promises to be a central site for the intersection of sound and literary studies in the coming years. It should be noted that contemporary critics, for the most part, have not met this newly popular reading practice with the same hopeful equanimity as their Victorian counterparts. In *Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies*, Rubery enumerates eight complaints leveled by skeptics of the form:

1. *Listening to an audiobook is a passive activity.*
2. *Audiobooks do not require the same level of concentration as printed books.*
3. *Audiobooks distort the original narratives through abridgement.*
4. *The pace of the audiobook is removed from a reader's control.*
5. *Reading aloud is for children.*
6. *The audiobook speaker interferes with the reader's reception of the text.*
7. *Audiobooks lack form.*
8. *Audiobooks appeal only to the ear, not the eye.*

(Rubery 2011: 10–15)

As should be clear from the list above, some of these complaints are patently absurd; others, however, raise legitimate issues regarding the formal differences between visual and aural engagement with language art. Both the codex and the audiobook offer possibilities that the other cannot duplicate; both, too, have unique limitations, and the field of literary studies will continue to explore these formal questions over the coming decade. As our lived experience becomes increasingly digital, I would predict that studies of literature and sound will necessarily turn toward other emerging trends, from the narrative possibilities of podcasting (that is, the runaway smash *Serial*) to the hybrid potential of tablet textuality (that is, the utilization of soundtracking platforms such as Booktrack). Moreover, as these new technologies and interfaces foreground the multisensory facets of reading that were always already there, we are also likely to witness a renewed interest in the phenomenology of reading: an increased attention to reading-as-sounded-practice or, as Tom McCarthy would have it, the literal enactment of listening in on listening itself.

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