Palgrave Studies in Sound

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Sound Poetics

Interaction and Personal Identity

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I celebrate myself, and sing myself…
Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

For Jo

Preface: Poetic Making

This is a book with the idea of poetry at its heart, by one who writes poetry, who makes radio and who believes in an intimate connection between the two disciplines. In it, the author will seek to explore the relationship between sound, interaction and identity, using the concept of the poetic as both metaphor and actual expression of the human condition. It is a short book, as books by poets sometimes are, and it is part of the author's ongoing research into the philosophy of sound, examining sonic signals as something heard both internally and externally, through imagination, memory and direct response. In doing so, it seeks to explore how the mind 'makes' sound through experience, as it interprets codes on the written page, and creates an internal *leitmotif* that then interacts with new sounds made through an aural partnership with the external world, chosen and involuntary exposure to music and messages, both friendly and antagonistic to the identity of the self. It will create an argument for sound as an underlying force that links us to the world we inhabit, an essential part of being in the same primal sense as the calls of birds and other inhabitants of a shared earth. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary for me to define this a little further and to provide a personal context for the motive behind this writing. What identity? Interaction with whom? Above all, why 'poetics'?

In 1958, four years before his death, Gaston Bachelard, professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, published a remarkable book, called *La poétique de l'espace*. The book was notable for many things, not least the way it took an everyday environment, the intimate locations in which

we each of us live our lives, and showed them to be places with significances we had not previously dreamed of. Published in English in 1964 as *The Poetics of Space*, the book begins with an introduction in which Bachelard confesses to a degree of soul-searching as he enters upon his exploration:

> A philosopher who has involved his entire thinking from the fundamental themes of the philosophy of science, and followed the main line of the active, growing rationalism of contemporary science as closley as he could, must forget his learning and break with all his habits of philosophical research, if he wants to study the problems posed by the poetic imagination. [Bachelard, xv]

Here, observed Bachelard, was a realm of thinking where the traditional academic values counted for little, where receptivity and intuition took precedence because the idea of the poetic involves the understanding of concepts that in many cases bypass the intellect, a flash of light, a momentary impression in which 'the poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche' [ibid.]. His was to be a quest based not on causality, but in 'reverberation' and 'in this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being' [ibid., xvi]. Poetry as an idea to be employed in this present writing belongs more to a state of mind than printed words (although it is that too). Poetry was after all, sound before it was print, spoken before it was written text. Beyond that, however, 'the poetic' owes itself to the Greek for making, for a creative act. We create artistically to express ourselves and to communicate with others.

Thus, I would argue that poetics, be they of space or of sound, are not concerned with a minority interest or elitist means of luxurious expression, but a fundamental exploration of what it means to be human. In his 1948 autobiography, the American poet, William Carlos Williams, referred to the writing of his great, book-length poem *Paterson*, which is set in and around the New Jersey town of the same name, as an attempt 'to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me' because 'a man is indeed a city, and for the poet there are no ideas but in things'. For Williams, place and sound became one with the human life around which it existed; the city noise, the people with whom which one interacted daily, and in particular, the Passaic River and falls with which the place is so strongly identified for anyone who knows the location. The roar of the giant waterfall is everywhere in the long poem,

either in the foreground, or as a distant but ever-present background soundscape, and 'in the imagination this roar is a speech or a voice, a speech in particular; it is the poem itself that is the answer' [Williams, 390–392].

William Carlos Williams was, by profession, a medical doctor; he worked as a general practitioner, serving hundreds of patients, visiting their homes, helping them to health and sometimes seeing them die. His two defining personal truths—the scientific and the poetic—were indivisible, and both operated within the interactive world of hometown America. He practiced medicine, but, like Bachelard, he remained accessible to 'a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche'. This book will cover many aspects of identity, but at its core will be the fervent encouragement to listen actively and critically; only by so doing will the poetics of sound offer up their prizes, showing how we are, fundamentally sonic beings, first and foremost.

I have worked as a radio practitioner for most of my life, and from the start, I felt the kindred disciplines of sound and poetry working together in the most meaningful expressive acts within my experience. Sound and poetry are kin; they both provide images that the mind is required to interpret, but they are not prescriptive, allowing each of us our own personal sets of pictures. Both can be transcendent, taking us to places beyond the physical limitations of our immediate environment, and both are at the root, sonic. In an early edition of the BBC's journal, *Radio Times*, an unnamed feature writer suggested that 'it is not a strange thing that men have made poems about broadcasting, for the new magic…is of the very stuff of poetry' [*Radio Times,* December 1927, quoted in Street, (1) 10]. The pioneers of radio, including the BBC's first managing director, later its first director-general, John Reith, were practical, technically adept and pragmatic, yet they were also visionary and imaginative. Reith himself, in his book, *Broadcast Over Britain*, published in 1924, just two years after the foundation of the (then) British Broadcasting Company, saw an almost mystical power in the new medium:

> When we attempt to deal with ether we are immediately involved in the twilight shades of the borderland; darkness presses in on all sides, and the intensity of the darkness increased by the illuminations which here and there are shed, as the investigators, candle in hand and advancing step by step, peer into the illimitable unknown. [Reith, 223]

Little wonder that when, a year later, the BBC opened its first national transmitter on Borough Hill, Daventry, at the very centre of England, on a site that had once been a Viking burial ground, the opening ceremony should include a specially commissioned poem by Alfred Noyse. The legend was that the Danes planted a tree at the centre of their cemeteries, the branches of which were believed to transmit the souls of the dead to the afterlife. The metaphor was not lost on Noyse; 'Daventry calling…' he wrote: a call sign as communication, invisible, yet potent. In the following pages, we shall explore the idea that we all possess our own individual set of audio responses and that we transmit and receive signals to and from the world around us in a variety of ways, personal, communal, cultural and political. Further, that the sound within us and the sound around us, whether physically heard or imagined through the suggestions of text, photograph, painting, sculpture or music, is a fundamental part of who we are. We are both transmitter and receiver, and in the words of Noyse's poem,

All are in one circle bound,
And all that ever was lost is found. [Noyse, in Street (1), 21]

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Contents