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The **Word Sounds**
of **Poetry,** of the **Voice**
and **Technology**

In his aesthetics lessons held between 1817 and 1829, Hegel sought to differentiate “poetry” and “music,” which were both related to the arts of “sound.” Hegel says: “The sound, the extreme, exterior material of poetry is no more the feeling which resounds (as happens with music), but a sign without a meaning,”¹ that’s, “sound as a simple sign useful for intuitions and interior representations”² in poetry, “the sound becomes word as a phoneme in itself, whose function lies in giving sense to representations and thoughts.”³

In 1923 Victor Sklovskij wrote: “One cannot say that each literary work has got contents, as everybody knows that the real origins of poetry are marked by absence of contents. The songs of the indios [indians], say, in the British Guiana, are only based on ‘heja, heja.’” Also meaningless are the songs of Patagonians and Papuasians, some North American tribes. Form preceeded content. The singer didn’t want to communicate a specific idea by means of words, but aimed to build a series of sounds and among them found a perfectly justified link, called form,⁴ and earlier, in 1916, in a very important, essay, Sklovskij had written: “men need words apart from their being meaningful . . . [maybe] in the special dance of the parts of the tongue, there is all the pleasure provoked by poetry.”⁵

What happened? Which events caused such a sudden, total change? Why are the borders between “poetry” and “music” so shortened? Why has the pregnancy of the word left the area of signified for that of signifier?

The desire to include poetry within music was evident: in a famous letter, dated July 2, 1844, Edgar Allen Poe wrote: “I’m really sensitive to music, ... Music is the perfection of soul and the essence of poetry. The undetermined impression generated by music ... ought to be the purpose of the whole poetry.”⁶ Verlaine, in *Art poetique*, 1882, suggested: “First of all, music, ... music, again and again, once more music.” And Mallarmé, in 1895, concluded: “we are looking for ... a kind of art which is able to bring into Poetry the symphony ... let’s forget the old-fashioned distinction between Music and Poetry ... I run the risk of such a statement: that Music and Poetry are the opposite sides of the same phenomenon.”⁷ Hopkins, the greatest victorian poet, because of the high level of his experimentalism considered a father of modern poetry, wrote all his poems under an overwhelming amount of musical research. In one of these, Spelt from Sybil’s leaves,⁸ he said: “About this sonnet, but that is true for all my poetry, please, remember that it has been written ... just to be said, said means not to read it with the help of the eye, but to read it aloud, slowly, poetically ... with long pauses, stopping along the rhymes and also into the stressed syllables, so on. This sonnet should be sung: this rhythm carefully analyzed, should be the stolen one.”⁹

Many critics and aesthetic scholars are writing a real “musical review of literature,” whereas others try to argue about what was supposed to have been Nietzsche’s point of view.¹⁰ The German philosopher may have shared the idea that poetry was born

through a certain, interior, musical feeling, which searches for its own words (sonority) and its own images (thoughts/meanings):¹¹ it seems that such a view was also supported by the abbot Henri Bremond in *La poésie pure*, 1925, issued with other critical essays in 1926,¹² and above all, a short but very important essay written by Jan Mukarovsky in *The motor process in poetry*, which appeared in the period between 1926 and 1929,¹³ which identifies the “motor process” or (interior rhythm) as any kind of poetic creation starting with a “sound current.” He says: **“the phonetical aspect acts not only in parallel with other parts of the text, but it operates towards them as a direct influence.”**¹⁴

But, let’s pay attention. “Musicalization” and “sonorization” are well separated concepts: speaking of “musicality in the line,” one means that the relationship between signified and signifier is so closed that the meaning is expected to be suggested also by the sounds of the words; the “sonorization” breaks, on the contrary, any links between signified and signifier, and it employs only “the sound signifier” as a self-meaningful material.

The passage from “musicalization” to “sonorization,” despite any declared intention of mysticism or pseudo-scientism, lies with the idea of “verbal structure” developed by Renè Ghil in *Traité du verbe* in 1886, and about which Mallarmè wrote, in *Avant-dire*: **“something else ... something musical rises,” bringing to an end “the isolation of the word.”**¹⁵ Ghil introduces in poetical composition (apart from the prejudice of the synaesthesia — the correspondence between sounds and colors) words taken from any kind of dictionary and meaningless neologisms to open the way to the future, abstract declamation and consequently mark the beginning of the long history of “sound poetry.”

And then, the question from the beginning, is still relevant: what has happened? Why is the pregnancy of the word so totally changed from signified to signifier?

An answer could be the following: Herbart’s aesthetics, unlike Hegel’s, were based on “meaning” and “symbol,” art as a pure chain of forms. All that was due also to the influence of a professor, first at Prague University, then in Wien, Robert Zimmermann, who followed Herbart’s theories.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a group of thinkers, more or less influenced by Herbart and Zimmermann, ignoring the more general philosophical view still alive in their research, re-plan the role of arts under a formalist perspective. The start was given by *The musical beauty*, an extraordinary work done by Eduard Hanslick, issued in 1854, in which the old-fashioned belief of music as expression of feelings was banned. The absolute independence of the music values was promoted and it stated that **“musical beauty lies only in the sounds and in their artistical connections.”**¹⁶

Some decades later, the visual arts are analyzed through the same formalist perspective, according to what is called the theory of the “pure visibility.” Such a theory was the result of conversations about art held between the painter Hans von Marées, by the art investigator Konrad Fiedler and by the sculptor Adolf Hildebrand. Fiedler wrote some essays, the most important of which, *The origin of artistic activity*, was published in 1887,⁴⁷ while Marées left no writings and Hildebrand only applied to sculpture the theories of the “pure visibility,” in a work whose title was *The problem of the form in visual art*, in 1893. The whole theory, a real earthquake from an Hegelian point of view could be easily summed by Riegl, Zimmermann’s student in Vienna, who thought himself a formalist and who writes about the “contents” of the work of art: **“these thoughts disturb the observer ... from the real, true, artistic datum in the work of art, that is, from the phenomenon of the object as form and colour in the plane and in the space.”**⁴⁸

In poetry, the autonomy of the word related to the meaning, though its inclusion into music, was not initially due, as we have seen, to the theorists, but the poets themselves. First of all, Mallarmè who was able to express it in the most conscious, definite way.⁴⁹ The change, even in poetry, from signified to signifier, the new approach to the aesthetic subject, has to be considered as a consequence of that “formalist” contest which, coming from philosophy and aesthetics, involved a great part of art life at the end of the nineteenth century. But such an answer is only partially satisfactory.

As argued elsewhere,⁵⁰ the building up of the form is due in all the arts to technological events which upset them and re-establish them. Returning to the development of poetry, which is the main focus already somewhat sketched out, we find inputs — the suggestions given by technological actions — whose value has not yet been given the consideration it deserves. Therefore, let’s start again from the beginning.

In 1876, the first telephone installed by Alexander Graham Bell at the Philadelphia Jubilee Exposition, provoked a huge impression throughout the world. In 1877, Thomas Alva Edison patented the phonograph. The telephone and the phonograph set the word into a new situation. In the living dialogue of the speakers, the instrument of the word is lived as a very normal, obvious act. The aim is directly to the meaning; now the technological word did not allow a similar casualness: first of all, it drew attention to itself, it made itself understood from the point of view of the sounding body and its technological being; it cut its primordial ties with its previous form of existence and status quo; it was no longer an immediate function of the body, nor was it connected to an essential unity of space and time; it could still be kept and recovered apart from any process of writing, it didn’t need any support different from its origin and it could be recalled as an authentic word from a voice.

All that made the word appear as a pure sound epiphany, it got rid of the subject and its meanings and it presented it as portrayed in itself, as an autonomous, self-sufficient existence. On one side we have to consider the experiments of poetic avant-gardes, first “musical,” then “sound” from Verlaine and Mallarmè to Ghil, from the abstract

declamation of the futurists and the dadaists to the “transmental” language, to the “zaum” of the Russian cubo-futurists. Also the experience of musicians like Leos Janàček who since 1894, under the influence of Zimmermann’s formalism, started to study the value of rhythm and melody in the word, creating “a theory of the melody in the language” according to which, “all the mysteries of the melody and of the rhythm in the music find a solution in the melody and the rhythm of the music at the level of the spoken language.”²¹ All that can’t be understood without considering the new presence of the technological word, the introduction of an existent, absolutely new, status.

But the technological aspect was not only worth being considered as a starting point for any form of “sound poetry,” it determined its secret purpose, its arrival: abolishing meaning from poetry, but did not want to introduce a mystic “poetry of the silence,” as Brèmond suggested. Its unconscious purpose was the destruction of “written poetry on the paper” and its change into a sonority typical of the magnetophone.

It is not true that the sound poets (as they love to say) have exploited the magnetophone to develop their poetic-sound research. It is true, on the contrary, that the magnetophone has exploited them to develop itself and their research. Since the very beginning, sound poetry was due to a technological development whose unconscious work, first aimed at the magnetophone, then at the electronic synthesis of word and sound.

I have demonstrated elsewhere,²³ the whole history of the poetic avant-garde is a sequence of periods, pushed forward by an interior logical necessity aiming at the transformation of “poetry” from the “page” to the technological instruments of sound: from the “musical” poetics (Verlaine, Mallarmè ...) to the abstract performance of historical avant-gardes, which still had writing as a point of reference, to the “new letters” (noises of the body) introduced by lettrism (Isou, Pomerand, Lemaître ...) which was already difficult to catalog, to the extreme results of ultra-lettrism (Wolman, Dufrene) which can’t be defined, but can be included in the area of “poetry” directly done thanks to magnetophone (Chopin, Heidsieck, Gysin, Nannucci ...) till all the possibilities available after the electronic approach of the voice (Radovanovic, Rothenberg, Amirkhanian, Minarelli ...).

The musicalization of poetry, then “sound poetry,” since the advent of the performing voice up to its electronical amplification, are the consequence of technologic actions and transform poetry according to its techno-methods and its techno-needs. From this point of view, “sound poetry” represents together with the “aesthetics of the communication” one of the most interesting aspects of that change in the aesthetic object that I call the technological sublime.²⁵

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1963. *Estetica*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 118.
- 2 Hegel, *Estetica*, 116.
- 3 Hegel, *Estetica*, 119.
- 4 Sklovskij, Viktor. 1979. "Letteratura e cinema." In Kraiski, Giorgio, editor. *I formalisti russi nel cinema*. Milan: Garzanti, 105.
- 5 Ejchenbaum, Boris. 1968. "La teoria del metodo formale." In Tzvetan Todorov, Tzvetan, editor. *I formalisti russi*. Turin: Einaudi, 39.
- 6 Caba, Jacques. 1961. *E.A. Poe*. Milan: Mondadori, 138.
See also, Ostrom, John Ward, editor. 1955. *Epistolario di Edgar Allan Poe*. Milan: Longanesi, 220.
- 7 Mallarmè, Stéphane. 1984. *La Musique et les Lettres*. In Igitur. *Divagations. Un coup de dés*. Paris: Gallimard, 359.
- 8 See Hopkins, Gerard Manley. 1952. *Poesie*. Parma: Guanda, 94-97.
- 9 See McLuhan, Marshall. 1976. *La galassia Gutenberg*. Rome: Armando, 123.
- 10 See della Volpe, Galvano. 1972. *Critica del gusto*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 95-100.
- 11 See Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1977. *La nascita della tragedia*. Milan: Adelphi, 40-42.
- 12 Brèmond, Henri. 1926. "La poésie pure" (1925). In *Prière et poésie*. Paris: Grasset.
- 13 Mukarovsky, Jan. 1987. *Il processo motorio in poesia (1926-29)*. Palermo: Aesthetica.
- 14 Mukarovsky, Il processo motorio, 62.
- 15 Mallarmè, *La Musique et les Lettres*, 252
- 16 Hanslick, Eduard. 1978. *Il bello musicale (1854)*. Firenze: Giunti-Martello, 48.
- 17 See Fiedler, Konrad. 1994. *Aforismi sull'arte (1914)*. Milan: TEA Arte.
- 18 Riegl, Alois. 1981. *Industria artistica tardoromana (1901)*. Firenze: Sansoni, 17.
- 19 See Mallarmè.
- 20 See Costa, Mario. 1999. *L'estetica dei media. Avanguardia e tecnologia (1990)*. Rome: Castelvechchi, 43-46.
- 21 See Abbiati, Franco. 1968. *Storia della musica*, Vol.IV. Milan: Garzanti, 720.
- 22 See Langer, Susanne K. 1965. *Sentimento e forma (1953)*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 272-274.
- 23 Costa, Mario. 1982. Poesia sonora e tecnologia elettrica. In *Misure Critiche*, XII, n.44-45, July-December, 171-174.
- 24 The "manifesto" of the aesthetics of the communication (Costa-Forest) has been written the 29th of October 1983; the history of this group is now in Costa, Mario. 1999. *L'estetica della comunicazione. Come il medium ha polverizzato il messaggio. Sull'uso estetico della simultaneità a distanza*. Rome: Castelvechchi.
- 25 See Costa, Mario. 1999. *Il sublime tecnologico*. Salerno: Edisud. Now in *Il sublime tecnologico. Piccolo trattato di estetica della tecnologia*. Rome: Castelvechchi, 1998.

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