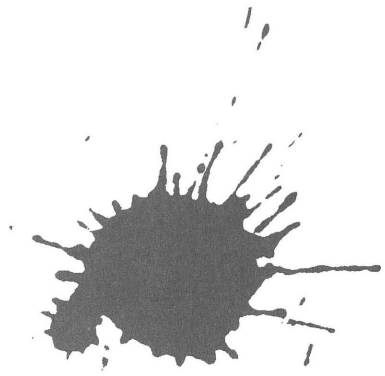


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TRUE HERITAGE:

The Sound Image in Experimental Poetry

The role of the image in experimental poetry is examined through an exploration of poetic reference to human sensory experience. From this vantage point, “True Heritage” differentiates sound images from visual images in poetry.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY witnessed a renaissance in the exploration of sound in poetry in Europe and North America. There were several aspects to this renaissance, from its early canonical manifestations in Italian futurism, dadaism, and the other historical avant-gardes through the audio-tape phase of the 1940s and 1950s (poesie concrète), on into the digital age. The return of performance in both large and small settings also occurred. At the same time, one should not fail to recognize the extra-canonical manifestations — popular musical forms, advertising, street rap, skat and the like — a rich brew drawn upon freely by poets. In a sense, the resurgence of interest in sound in poetry constitutes a kind of reaction to the rigidity of printed language and the institutional ossifications it mediates. That is, inherent in these cultural forms lies a politics, always, usually well concealed whether or not foregrounded in terms of content. When I speak of “sound” in poetry, I am aware of the distinction between the human voice/body as real-time originator of the art, on the one hand, and technological extensions or substitutions of the voice, on the other hand. In what follows, I present



a meditation on the image seen as imbued with power; hence the need for a politically sensitive understanding of what might seem somewhat removed from matters of power. However, in my approach to the subject I want to make sure to include a broader spectrum of perspectives so as to enliven debates about the role of the image in experimental poetry.

They used to call the sound image the music of language. Dante says: “A canzone is a composition of words set to music.” (Pound, 31) Pound also says, “If a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.” (32) Another way of putting this is that when there is no common idiom or medium, there is no real nation as such, and this state of affairs will be reflected in literature. Pound again: “. . . you still charge words with meaning mainly in three ways, called phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader’s imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you used groups of words to do this.” (37) He goes on to develop his notion of melopoeia, relevant to our discussion, as follows: “There are three kinds of melopoeia, that is, verse made to sing; to chant or intone; and to speak.” (61) What I take all this to mean is that poetry in its fullness as a living art comes to us embedded in structured sound. Only this way can the imagination be fully engaged. Therefore, printed poetry becomes a kind of performance score for the specific embodiment of these potential meanings during a particular realization of them, highlighting in another way what Blake calls the “minute particulars.” (Of course, there remains the question of the received conventions of structured sound – call it music, oralized poetry – and how they themselves have undergone radical transformations throughout the twentieth century, but to explore this would lead us off in another direction.) Yet none of this attempts to say just what the sound image is. What about the visual image?

It’s clear that the link between the domains of sound and sight (vision) lies in the overlapping of the bridge term “image” (same morphological construct participating in two different discourses), which leads to confusion. Among the fruitful discussions of these matters are those of Ong, Zumthor and Mitchell. For example, in discussing the historical change-over from an aurally-based to a visually-based aesthetic, Ong says: *The sensorial organization specific to any given time and culture may bring us to overspecialize in certain features of actuality and to neglect others. Each organization of the sensorium will likewise predispose us for errors typical of such an organization: verbomotor man can overlay the personal as visualist man can underplay it.* (175)




I find this kind of statement has a moderating influence, although frequently Ong argues for the superiority of sound over sight in questionable metaphysical terms. In each case, the core question is the following: what is an image? Even to pose the question immediately involves us in the oldest of philosophical debates in the Western world. However, not to pose the question begs it. In order to further the matter, then, what I would like to add to the dialogue is another sense of image than is common in the literature on the subject.

To the degree that poetry is an art of sound, and from the viewpoint of the listener, the poetic image may tap into more than one dimension of the sensorium: 1) as sound and 2) through verbal reference to the visual, tactile and so on. Insofar as poetry is an art of sight (so-called silent reading), the poetic image takes vision as its primary sensory medium but may make verbal reference, at least implicitly but more often explicitly, to sound, touch and so on.

These kinds of observations, however, do little to expand our appreciation of poetry. To this end, I feel that not nearly enough emphasis has been placed on the verbal/non-verbal complex, especially in a context of the distinctions commonly drawn between inner and outer dimensions of perceived reality. That is, a phenomenology of the image based in a splitting of consciousness can open up new ground for a deeper understanding of how experimental poetry functions.

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that the grounds for examination of poetry remain pre-eminently verbal (printed), not graphic-visual or aural. Printed language is naively and uncritically taken as a direct reflection of a prior, fuller language condition, whether or not oralized in the speech act. What's excluded here are the suprasegmental phonemic level (juncture, stress, rhythm, pitch and pause) of oralized language, on the



one hand, and the visual-graphic dimension of printed language, on the other. This narrowing of signification throws excessive emphasis on syntax (word order in English), disadvantaging the metaphorical, symbolic, allusive, imagistic, musical qualities of language, in other words, those qualities conventionally held to be the specifically poetic. According to Olson, we can thank the ancient Greeks for setting up this dilemma. He says:

... the Greeks went on to declare all speculation as enclosed in the "UNIVERSE of discourse". . . We stay unaware how two means of discourse the Greeks appear to have invented [. . . logos as generalizations; the particulars of a single person's speech . . .] hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Olson of course favors the particular: "If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action."⁽⁵⁵⁾ That is, without taking into consideration the socio-historical contexts in which various registers of language are created and disseminated, and the material-power values that accrue thereby, we are hampered in our ability to offer more than a formalistic analysis, which would simply repeat what has already been accomplished by a number of others.

How, then, can we use printed language to expand our understanding of those aspects of language (the poetic image) that exist by virtue of their ability to contradict, undermine, transcend or drive energy deep into the structures of conventional critical discourse? First, we can acknowledge the tenuous nature of such statements. Second (and on the basis of what was just mentioned), we can use language to gesture towards the non-verbal image, acknowledging its autonomous existence. Thus, I want to draw an explicit distinction between the phrase "mental image" and that to which it refers, for the purpose of validating that to which the phrase refers rather than of subsuming it once again under the rule of words.

This first division opens a space for pre-verbal or non-verbal images, which, with Achterberg, we can loosely define as "the thought process that invokes and uses the senses. . . . the communication mechanism between perception, emotion and bodily change."⁽⁶⁾ In this connection, then, the image, like the senses, is a kind of bridge between the inner and outer dimensions of human experience. It is that bridge

constructed by the senses to mediate between the Cartesian divide of body and mind. If we can accept some such formulation, then it is not necessary to give a more specific definition of “sound image” or “visual image” in poetry; anyway, different people would undoubtedly come up with somewhat different ways of circumscribing these uses of the terms. Instead, we are proposing a dynamic or functional approach – not what the image is but what the image does.

The mechanism referred to can be called a symbol. Whatever the name, some images carry an emotional charge that compels attention, whereas others are relatively neutral. That is, incorporating Achterberg’s formulation, we can say that some images communicate more fully than others. Among the various language forms invented by people, poetry is the specific home of images. Furthermore, experimental poetry (that kind always in search of different forms), or at least some kinds of it, tends to rely heavily on symbolic images, especially the most fully charged kinds it can muster. I want to put forth a very generous sense of the symbol here, one in line with Sandner’s: “A symbol is any thing which may function as the vehicle for a conception. . . . a word, a mathematical notation, an act, a gesture, a ritual, a dream, a work of art . . .”(12)

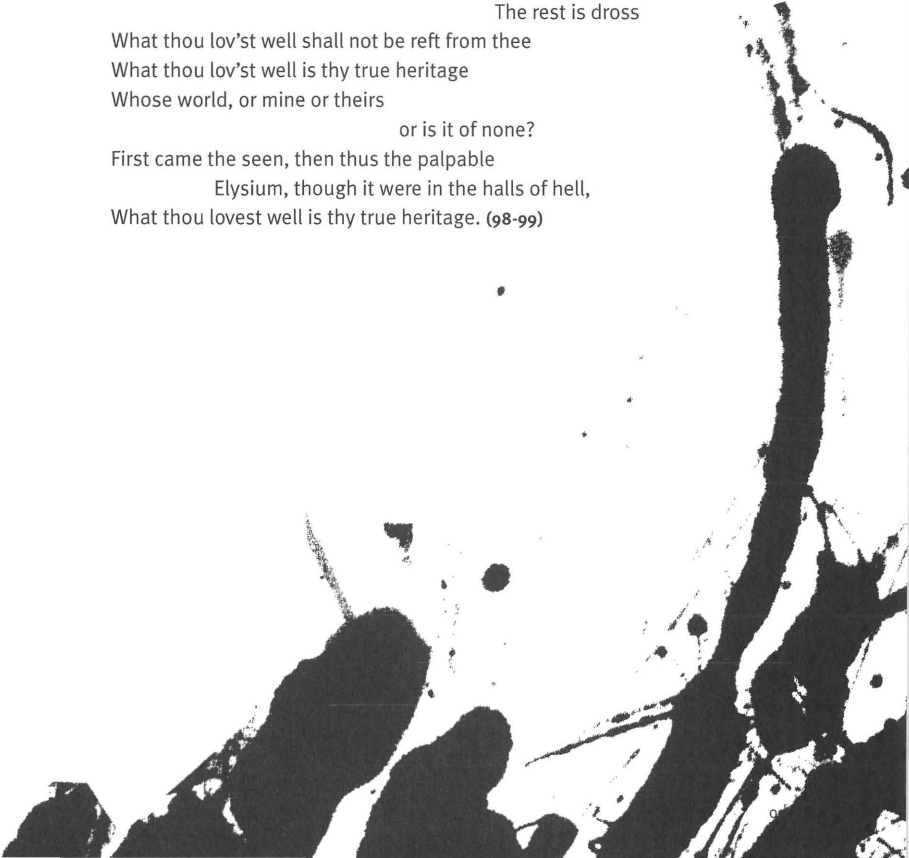
Symbols convert energy. In Navaho healing ceremonies, “It is as if two compartments in the psyche are forcefully brought together: there occurs a release of energy and a feeling of relief.”(15) In order for such symbols to function, all parties to their deployment must share cultural beliefs in their nature and efficacy. The same holds for poetic symbolic imagery, itself a direct descendant of these more integrated symbol systems. Perhaps this is why discussions of the metaphysics of aurality often touch on the whole area loosely and inadequately referred to as “the sacred” (either nostalgically or scornfully) (cf. Ong, Menezes).

Jung’s theory of the archetypes of the collective unconscious provides an alternative way to understand the emotional dimension of symbolic images. First, it is important to understand that Jung took great pains to differentiate his psychology from religion, especially after the publication of *Answer to Job* (1952), which brought down on him the wrath of some theologians, who claimed he was being sacrilegious, and at the same time the self-righteous fury of others, who asserted he was out to found a new religion. However, Jung was not out to found another religion (prophets, revealed truth, priesthood to interpret it, sacraments and the like). Rather, his intent was to address the inner experience of individuals who had lost their faith, just as he himself had. As he says in “Psychology and Religion” (1937), “To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate experience.” (*Collected Works*, 11, 89) Late in his life Jung returns to the subject, again trying to make clear that for him what matters is the psyche, one’s inner life. He says, “I do not imagine that in my reflections on the meaning of man and his myth I have uttered a final truth, but I think that this is what can be said at the end of our aeon of the Fishes, and perhaps must be said in view of the coming aeon of Aquarius” (MDR, 339)

Powerful emotional reactions to sound-poetry performances always go well beyond the level of immediate physiological response, thereby requiring a theory of how the symbolic image functions as a mediator between inner and outer dimensions of experience. Because we live in a culture that still uses this distinction (between the inner and the outer), image theory makes possible a flexible and effective way to understand the dynamic tensions between these registers of our experience. As Jung says, "The symbolic process is an experience in images and of images" (IX, 1, 38), which arise through a mixing of sense data and psychic predisposition. "The fantasy-images outweigh the influence of sensory stimuli and mould them into conformity with a pre-existing psychic image."⁽⁶⁶⁾ Sound poetry taps into the deeper layers of the psyche, oftentimes sacrificing reliance upon verbal syntax, maximizing use of para-verbal elements of language, and, in the digital domain, working purely with pre-verbal sound structures.

Rather than understanding this condition as "the new" or "the different," my proposition is that the most exciting and profound developments in experimental sound poetry are symbolically mediated through and through. A theory of the image allows us to retain a link with what is most valuable in the ever-changing past. As Pound in his most strictly measured musical style says in Canto LXXXI:


What thou lov'st well remains,
The rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
or is it of none?
First came the seen, then thus the palpable
Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,
What thou lovest well is thy true heritage. (98-99)





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