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*Sound Writing: Experimental Modernism and the Poetics of Articulation.* Tobias Wilke.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. 263.

What does “Je vous aime” look like? The question is ambiguous. Suppose we are not talking about anything cultural or semantic or alphabetic. What is left in part is *what it would look like* when someone says “Je vous aime.” But what would you look at to see what it looks like? The speaker’s face? Some image of their mouth cavity, tongue, and throat? Some technologically generated representation of the sound they produce? Some technologically captured map of the physiological or mental activity that coincided with the sound’s production? All these possibilities fall into the domain of the “sound writing” that Tobias Wilke takes up in this immensely intriguing book. Along with studying “multiple avant-garde strategies for reducing poetry to its most elemental conditions in vocal sound production” (1), Wilke also carefully explores scientific approaches to the production of vocal sound in order to demonstrate how poets “appropriat[ed] scientific-experimental concepts and techniques” (2).

The earliest figure in Wilke’s first chapter, “Voice Figures: Visible Sound and the Poetics of Articulation (1787–1965),” is Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni, whose 1787 *Discoveries in the Theory of Sound* offered “idealized and . . . even concocted illustrations” of sound waves propagating themselves through planes of glass, metal, and the like. Novalis was taken with Chladni’s work. For him, it suggested the possibility of “a system of visual representation for all possible sounds, which would . . . derive directly and causally from the corresponding vibrations themselves” (38). The *phonautograph* of Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, patented in 1857, and “constructed

of a funnel, a flexible membrane, a writing stylus, and a revolving drum covered with smoke-blackened paper,” offered another vision. “When words were spoken or sung into the funnel, the sound waves of the vocal utterance would cause the instrument’s membrane to vibrate, which in turn caused the stylus to trace these vibrations on the recording surface where they took on the visual shape of undulating lines.” Wilke refers to the results as “indexical inscriptions” thanks to which one could “measure the amplitudes and frequencies underlying various acoustic phenomena such as volume and pitch, and thus . . . render the human voice and its audible manifestations accessible to exact scientific investigation” (44). The “Je vous aime” example comes in relation to a device called a *phonoscope* (patented in 1882), whose purpose was to make “the mouth’s articulatory activity more easily readable through its visual mediation in static pictures” (46). The invention of Georges Demeny, who worked in the laboratory of Étienne Marey, it was intended to help people learn lip-reading skills. (Katherine Bergeron has covered some of this same ground in *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* [Oxford University Press, 2010], particularly in the sections of her second chapter called “Figures of Speech” and “Talking Machines.”) For Wilke, all of these devices are examples of the scientific history of attempts to “inscribe acoustic phenomena indexically in a medium accessible to the eye” (52). He usually uses “index” in the sense of a track or a trace of something, although we will see there is one key moment where he shifts to the sense of an index as a sign whose function is to point.

The first chapter stretches to 1965, the date of Austrian writer Raoul Hausmann’s composition *Oaoa*. For Wilke, in *Oaoa*, Hausmann “effectively creates a hybrid *figure* of sound within which the (indexical image of the) corporeal production of speech coalesces

with its graphic symbolization” (21), thereby bringing together elements from the scientific and poetic histories Wilke lays out in detail in subsequent chapters. *Oaoa* is an emblem of Wilke’s own project, part of Hausmann’s “retrospective reflection on the way in which articulation was able to *become* an object of literary relevance in the first place” (16).

Chapter 2, “Toward a Science of Verse: Speech Movements, Graphic Inscription, and the Study of Poetry (1871–1915),” delves further into the history of devices that aim to capture the process of poetic articulation. Amadeo Gentili’s glossograph somehow fit inside your mouth without preventing you from talking and “translated the motor activity of tongue and lips, as well as the vibrations of the larynx and the air pressure of expiration, into electromagnetic signals for the activation of several ‘writing pens.’” Those pens produced “six parallel lines” which “could (ostensibly) be viewed and decoded as a text” (67). A physiologist named Ernst Brücke developed a kymograph, which involved attaching an implement to your bottom lip to “register the lip’s up- and downward movements and trace them across the writing surface in the form of one continuous line,” resulting in what Brücke called “‘images’ in which the metrical composition of each individual spoken verse took visible shape” (73). A slightly different intellectual current includes figures such as Edward Wheeler Scripture or Felix Kruger, who aimed to capture information they could correlate to emotions behind the verse. Kruger’s laryngograph was “designed to capture the vibrations of the vocal cords—in order to create visual tracings on paper that could then be deciphered as externalized material *indices* of the affects or feelings the speaker had ‘expressed’” (88). People in this current imagined there to be a universal connection between certain sounds and emotions.

Writing of Theodor Lipps, Wilke describes the hypothesis of “a universally accessible, universally valid phonetic *iconicity*, which connects the sound pattern of poetry’s audible materiality with the psychological dynamic that sets those patterns in motion” (101).

Robert Chenault Givler experimented with the “transmogrification” of verses—a process by which a nonsense line of verse would be produced based on a frequency analysis of different sound combinations in poems by, say, Keats. Subjects would recite both poems and their transmogrified nonsense counterparts so that Givler could “compare the emotional responses evoked by the two sets of poetic stimuli” (106) and thereby apparently capture the effects of sound qualities themselves. These experimenters believed they could discover a relation between a sound form and an emotion that is presupposable, as opposed to one that is entailed by ongoing exposure to a particular kind of language in a particular cultural location. They lacked an understanding of what Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine call, following Peirce, *rhematization*, a situation in which “a conjecture makes an indexical relation into an iconic one.”<sup>1</sup>

Wilke is not so much interested in an analysis of the semiotic naivety and unreflective monoculturalism of these figures as he is in seeing them as precursors for the poets and thinkers central to his third chapter: “Mama—Papa—Dada: Poetic Expression at the Threshold of Language (1916–1947),” which is the heart of the book. He begins with Viktor Shklovsky’s 1916 essay “On Poetry and Trans-Sense Language,” “the earliest attempt to address the new *literary* significance of ‘meaningless sound’ from a systematic, verse-scientific angle” (117). From there he moves on to the Dadaists, Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck and their sound poems, demonstrating “how the scientific concepts that had made their way from Germany to Russia at the turn of the century, and

received an initial literary-theoretical interpretation at Shklovsky's hands, acquired an ever more powerful presence in a thoroughly international milieu of poetic production" (118). The word *dada* and stories told of its coinage fascinate Wilke. "The expression marks the point of intersection between meaningless babble and linguistic signification, insofar as it is, empirically speaking, both expressive vocal gesture and conventional sign" (139). Wilke particularly likes the story Huelsenbeck tells of Ball's finger moving deictically down a page of a dictionary until Huelsenbeck calls out for him to stop at the word *dada*. They like the word for what it means, but also for the fact that it is sometimes taken to be a sound before language, an early attempt to forge an indexical relation to the world. Wilke likes it because it brings together "pure articulate sound, indexical gesture, and symbolic code" (139), but it does so, so to speak, preposterously: one can only imagine it as pure articulate sound after the fact.

Wilke's fourth chapter, "Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations: Experimental Modernism in a Technical Age (1947–1967)," runs from László Moholy-Nagy's 1947 *Vision in Motion*, with its "premise that art must express elementary psychophysiological energies" (167), through the poetic experiments of Charles Olson and the scientific experiments of Bell Telephone Laboratories, into the age of information theory and noise, and the nonhuman synthesis of sound. He brings his book to a close with Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Derrida. For Wilke, McLuhan and Derrida, however incompatible with each other, both had projects that obstructed further progress in the poetic tradition invested in the articulation of sound. McLuhan's insistence on a complete media revolution thanks to which "we are back in acoustic space" (quoted on 211), and, in a different way, Derrida's critique of "phonocentrism" and his adumbration of *écriture*

both foreclosed further experimentation along the lines Wilke has been laying out. Because there is something “polemically *unphysiological*” in Derrida’s thought about articulation, the uptake of his work is “a pervasive, quasi-reflexive privileging of experiments with ‘graphic articulations’ and alphabetic letters over experiments with voice and speech” (217). Wilke’s hope is that now, with the passage of time and the reexamination of the history he has traced, a new chapter might be opened in the poetic history of the writing of vocal articulation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 123–24.

<sup>2</sup> Wilke doesn’t engage much with the body of work commonly called “sound studies” these days (the stakes of that field are nicely laid out in Tom McEnaney, “The Sonic Turn,” *Diacritics* 47, no. 4 [2019]: 80–107), but he could make common cause with many scholars in that field, especially where it intersects with linguistic anthropology (e.g., the work of Steven Feld or Nicholas Harkness). It would also be interesting to see Wilke engage with the way voice has been taken up recently by someone like Nina Sun Eidsheim in *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Eidsheim drops in briefly to Bell Labs as well (228 n. 11), but sees what is going on there from an angle suggestively different from Wilke’s.