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Learning to Hear: Modern Poetry's Acoustic Educations

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Learning to Hear: Modern Poetry's Acoustic Educations

By

Serena Trac Anh Le

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Professor Eric Falci, Chair

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Abstract

Learning to Hear: Modern Poetry's Acoustic Educations

by

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In the lived day-to-day of literature classrooms and poetry seminars, the line between literal and figurative calls to “hear” can be notoriously hard to decipher. More often than not, the “ears” that are called upon are less metaphorical than metonymic, actual organs of audition undistinguished in language from the complex physiological and neurological processes they can potentially enable. Their repeated solicitation not only suggests but actively promotes a relationship between poetry and sound from which some readers are, by nature, excluded. This project asks what we truly need to know about hearing, language, and human physiology in order to consider new possibilities for communication about sound with respect to poetry. What do we need to change about our critical and pedagogical practice? By interrogating the hearing and learning processes of several literary figures whose lives, communities, and readerships owed much to public and personal conceptions of their “ears,” this project examines how our beliefs about hearing (born of our respective experiences with sound) impact what we think language can do. The acoustic educations formative to modern poetry, it argues, are no different from our own. What the readings of this project embody is a form of attention that might be called “distance listening”: a mode of listening and critical analysis that interrogates and makes apparent individual capacities to perceive and imagine highly particularized acoustic conditions. These are conditions not merely of learned speech but also of temporally located environments, bodies, texts, and spaces. Ultimately, this project seeks to know how we can recognize the labor and forms of access that precede individual imaginative acts. A robust and diverse readership for poetry, it contends, relies heavily on the willingness of hearing poets, scholars, and educators to resist simply seeking out or subsisting on a community of sympathetic ears.

to Eric  
*il miglior ascoltatore*

to my family

and to Lo

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These nods will be brief because the spirits they wish to acknowledge wish for me not to be slower. And so they will loved, too, by other means—by presence and by time, by life lived together. To Meredith of the pies and David of the laughter, to Chase of the and Alyssa of the grace, to Rachel of the interventions and to Rachel of the outerventions, to Elana of the rugged will and Andy of the rugged heart, to Anne of plants and life and water and Carrie of persistence and inspiration, to Trista of blooming, brimming, building and Katie of steady faith, to Miki of vim and Amanda of vigor, to Sandra of kind and conscious strength, to Jacob of every single emboldening breakfast, to Pablo for patiently paving the way, to my dear, fierce Jessica, witness, wisdom, and warmth this long while, to Lo, my love, for loving and loving, to Eric to whom this is foremost dedicated, for never quite managing to give up the fight, for pulling me out and through as ever just in the nick of time. To my parents and brother, growing every day with me, who will know this for the gift it is—not in terms of its contents of words and figures, but in terms of the time it gives us back into our lives, time I am better equipped to live and to spend because of all this work has taught me. I love you all.

## I. DISTANCE LISTENING

The great thing you have to say to us, as poets, is :  
READ!            Read and learn, learn to hear.

William Carlos Williams to Ezra Pound  
from a letter dated October 30, 1946

In “An Ear for Poetry,” her 2015 essay with poet Julian Gewirtz, literary scholar Rachel Kolb writes of learning to read poems. Specifically, she writes of learning to read poems without also being able to hear them. Kolb, born profoundly deaf, spent the first twenty years of her life unable to differentiate intuitively between stressed and unstressed syllables or to respond instinctively to rhyme. And though the circumstances of her hearing have since changed—in 2010, she received an Advanced Bionics cochlear implant and now lives with what she elsewhere calls a “dynamic onslaught of sound”<sup>1</sup>—her account of coming to poetry through deafness poses significant questions to a field rife with expectations about the human ear.

“Listen for it,” Kolb recalls being told, as if that imperative alone, delivered repeatedly by high school and college instructors alike, could alter her physical relationship to words and meter. “Sometimes someone would help me clap out a poem’s scansion with my hands, thereby channeling the flow of language to my body,” she relates. “Nonetheless, the primary emphasis in our conversations always fell on sound, something I could teach myself to discuss, in the same way one discusses abstract or elusive concepts, such as atomic orbitals, but never completely grasp.”<sup>2</sup> Working deliberately to memorize and visually identify the metrical patterns and sonic significances conveyed to her by others (a process she compares to memorizing Latin rules for long and short vowels), Kolb was made keenly aware of the distance, and the difference, between received knowledge and raw sensation. The notion of being moved by the sound of a poem—of being moved, more precisely, by what others might embrace as the sound of poetry—remained, for Kolb, little more than a notion. And yet she knew she could be moved by poetry. She had found meaning in the work of such writers as Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, William Wordsworth, and John Donne, and this meaning seemed to her both vital and visceral, no less potent for what she could not hear.

At the heart of Kolb’s account is a critique of an especially old and pervasive literary-critical tendency: the conflation of poetic practice with hearing practice, of readers with listeners and of poets with ears. As Kolb and Gewirtz (who was born hearing) acknowledge, poetry’s historical origins, above all its roots in oral tradition and, through “lyric,”<sup>3</sup> in instrumental accompaniment, make such confluences seem apropos. Poets and scholars often additionally point out that “hearing” and “listening” need not always refer to literal instances of sound perception—that taken expansively, metaphorically, they evoke diverse conditions of comprehension and receptivity, and that “having an ear for poetry” may readily describe any number of poetic appetites and aptitudes. But in the lived day-to-day of literature classrooms and poetry seminars, the line between literal and figurative—and between historical contexts and contemporary expectations—can be notoriously

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Kolb, “Your Story.”

<sup>2</sup> Julian Gewirtz and Rachel Kolb, “An Ear for Poetry.”

<sup>3</sup> Derived from the Middle French “lyrique” meaning “a short poem expressing emotion,” which is in turn derived from the Latin “lyricus” and the Greek “lyrikos” meaning “of or singing to the lyre,” this term now describes a much wider range of poetic exploits, though it carries with it an especially dense web of associations.

hard to decipher. More often than not, the “ears” that are called upon are less metaphorical than metonymic, actual organs of audition undistinguished in language from the complex physiological and neurological processes they can potentially enable. Their repeated solicitation not only suggests but actively promotes a relationship between poetry and sound from which readers like Kolb are, seemingly by nature, excluded. That poems are the domain of those who (non-metaphorically) hear language; that mastery, either of poetic composition or of poetic analysis, relies at least in part on literal ears; that these literal ears (and the auditory cognition they metonymically represent) may be ranked on a scale from “bad” to “good,” with “deaf” rarely, if ever, accounted for, are just some of the audist<sup>4</sup> presumptions underlying even our most casual literary exchanges. These presumptions do not merely obscure the true number and breadth of those who find meaning in poetry; they can also, as Kolb and Gewirtz argue, prevent new readers from approaching the genre and new writers from augmenting it.

Yet Kolb and Gewirtz are optimistic about our potential to rupture the critical lens that would (wittingly or otherwise) omit deaf poets and Deaf culture from discussions of poetic mastery. Stressing the effectiveness of American Sign Language (ASL) poets like Clayton Valli and Bernard Bragg, whose poems exist solely as gestures in air, they remind us of our power not only to revise our impressions of the poetic canon but also to remake our parameters for discourse. “The work that [deaf poets] have already produced, both in standard written formats and in ASL poetry,” they write, “challenges the idea that it is necessary for a good poet to have a ‘good ear’—pushing it, even, to absurdity.”<sup>5</sup> Can we imagine a way of speaking, writing, reading about poetry that does not make assumptions with respect to hearing? Can we disentangle ourselves from phrases and imperatives that entrench a sense of preference for auditory ability? To do so, they suggest, would be to recognize the call of those poets who would have us “shake off our unthinking habits of speech and inherited patterns of thought to consider a wider range of possibilities for communication.” It would be to practice, in our discussions of poetry, the kind of attention to difference and openness to versatility we so often attribute to poetry outright.

My project springs from the same wealth of questions and challenges that Kolb and Gewirtz lay bare. I fully believe, as they do, that neither historical precedent nor metaphorical expedience should lead us to perpetuate “a sphere of *inaccessibility* in the way poetry is read and discussed.”<sup>6</sup> At its simplest, this writing comprises some of my efforts to think more precisely and concretely about poetic sound—to eschew metaphor and, where possible, metonym in favor of gaining clearer insight into a range of aural conditions pertinent to poetry.

Unlike Kolb, however, I am a hearing individual. Moreover, I am a hearing individual for whom exhortations to listen have rarely been a source of anxiety or a precursor to isolating feelings of difference. “I did listen,” “I will listen,” “I heard,” I say. In college I studied both literature and music, and I’ve spent much of my life as a performing musician. As a result, I’ve gone scarcely a day without deliberate, deliberative sound-making community. I’ve sung in class, at rehearsal, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Formerly used interchangeably with “audile” to describe someone whose, per the Oxford English Dictionary, “mental imagery or learning process is thought chiefly to involve the sense of hearing, this term is now taken as a derivative of “audism,” a term coined by communication and language researcher Tom L. Humphries. In his 1977 doctoral dissertation, “Communicating Across Cultures (Deaf-Hearing) and Language Learning,” Humphries defines audism as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears” and an audist as someone who espouses this notion.

<sup>5</sup> Gewirtz and Kolb, “An Ear for Poetry.”

<sup>6</sup> Gewirtz and Kolb, “An Ear for Poetry,” emphasis original.

library, over dinner—spontaneously, exuberantly, demonstratively, for emphasis. I read my writing out loud to myself as *a way of writing* and regularly expect my experience of sound to give me detailed information about the world. In my first year as an English graduate student, I gravitated toward those who wished to converse with me about sound, who could hear (or at very least convey the *semblance* of hearing) what I heard. I even switched my emphasis from prose to poetry because I felt starved for this kind of companionship—because I wished to revel in the out-loud rhythm-reverent voices of my peers and to feel uplifted by our communal attention to, and our express capacity for, very literal forms of listening. My experience of sound, therefore, far from being a mere fact of my existence, has at many moments been my greatest source of affirmation and connection. And when it comes to audist presumptions, I’ve been wholly guilty.

When the non-metaphorical “good ear”—for poetry, for music, for hearing the world and others at large—is thought to be one’s own, when one has been praised all one’s life for literal acts of hearing, what incentives exist to imagine otherwise?

As with every call for new “habits of speech,” the labor to change cannot be overstated. Even Kolb and Gewirtz bear responsibility for some glibness when they suggest that “inherited patterns of thought” can be “shaken off,” as if the work of relearning how one encounters and makes sense of the world is just a matter of briskly reclassifying, and then of summarily dislodging, a set of once familiar (now newly foreign) objects. Effacement of effort, albeit driven by optimism, does us no favors when, at bottom, we must account for the operations of real bodies and minds (both others’ and our own) before any assessment of what is unthinking, habitual, or inherited can take place. I suspect that knowledge of experiences like Kolb’s would have significantly influenced my earlier thinking about both poetry and sound, but shifting how I speak and feel about each of these things has proven to be a much deeper process. It is one thing to steer clear of a metaphor and another to address the very real need for expression a metaphor represents. In particular, metaphors concerning the ear are not unique to literary scholarship. They cross over from the many other fields and activities through which we encounter sound, where the language of training exists independently from the language of research, and where the language that feels communicative may resist classification entirely.

What do we truly need to know about sound, about language, about human physiology in order to “consider a wider range of possibilities for communication”?<sup>7</sup> What do we actually need to change about our critical and pedagogical practice? Even when distinctions are made between literal and metaphorical expectations for hearing, our account of the literal tends to subsist on generalization, such that a poet’s or a reader’s ear is rarely precisely described in terms of what it does and does not hear, or how, or why. Kolb, for whom all descriptions of sound once resided in abstraction, is a searingly effective counter to any blanket assertion that those who care for poetry must be capable of hearing language. But one needn’t read far into the science of audition to understand that “hearing” and “not hearing” are not, in and of themselves, especially helpful descriptors of any one individual’s relationship to sound. Acknowledging Deaf poets and being mindful when associating poetry with sound are crucial steps toward valuing and improving access, but these actions comprise only a fraction of what it would mean to communicate about hearing with better nuance. The lack of recognition and knowledge concerning deafness in literary scholarship is, at its core, a lack of recognition and knowledge concerning the diversity of human

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<sup>7</sup> Gewirtz and Kolb, “An Ear for Poetry.”

hearing experience, and this in turn speaks to the especially large void in both our collective and individually held knowledges about perceived and actual sound.

### Particularizing the Metaphor

Among the examples Kolb and Gewirtz use to demonstrate the murkiness of ear metaphors is this explanatory quote from poet K. Silem Mohammad: “When we say that a poet ‘has a good ear,’ we usually mean that that poet has gone past the stage of mere listening, and has passed the transmission (which the poet has supposedly ‘heard’ in order to create the poem) on to the reader via writing, thus becoming the sender rather than the receiver.”<sup>8</sup> Here the focus is on the eventual transmission of a poem “via writing,” an emphasis that frames the relationship between poetry and aurality in terms merely of the *feeling* of hearing or being heard, which itself seems a harmless shorthand for the *feeling* of understanding or being understood. Of course, as Kolb and Gewirtz point out, our encouragement of this framing can have alienating results. Mohammad himself offers the explanation in part to interrogate it: “The expression clearly suggests that the significant talent on the poet’s part is one of being able to ‘hear’ what will sound most effective even before it has been physically spoken,” he notes. “In fact, the poem may *never* be read aloud, and readers will still make judgments about the poet’s ear. The concept thus potentially allows both poet and reader to bypass any literal act of listening; both may establish themselves as having good ears without necessarily ever hearing any actual sounds.”

Presented in this light, the conferral of “good ear” accolades in the field of poetry begins to seem absurd or even, as Mohammad suggests, “utterly fictitious, a performative utterance intended to establish credibility.” At the same time, and this is Mohammad’s point too, dismissing all such utterances overlooks their usefulness as data about the many literal hearing experiences poets, readers, and scholars have sought sincerely to convey. In most cases, whether or not a poem is read aloud or actively associated with sound-making, its potential to be perceived by a reader at least in part in terms of sound is exceedingly high. Not only are a majority of readers hearing, but studies have also consistently shown that hearing individuals who learn language in relationship to sound are neurologically incapable of truly “silent” reading and writing; the auditory contexts within which a hearing person learns (or has learned) a language fundamentally and unceasingly shape even their deepest, most internal reading and writing processes.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, there is a non-trivial need in poetry to support and engage in non-metaphorical conversations about hearing and sound perception. However rapidly we move away from phrases like “good ear”—fully acknowledging how little they convey and how many individuals they exclude—we are still left with the task of describing and accounting for real feelings of consensus about the auditory potentials of poetic engagement.

The above quotes from Mohammad all appear in his first of four short essays collectively entitled “The Poet’s Ear.” Throughout the series, he aims to identify, assess, and expand our sense of what he calls “materially verifiable claims about language”<sup>10</sup>—claims concerning a poem’s rhyme

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<sup>8</sup> K. Silem Mohammed, “The Poet’s Ear” (Part I). As this essay was published online, it appears without page numbers. I will indicate just when I switch amongst the essay’s four parts; otherwise, quotes may be assumed to be drawn from the most recent part indicated.

<sup>9</sup> Marcela Perrone-Bertolotti et al., “How Silent Is Silent Reading?”

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed, “The Poet’s Ear” (Part II).

scheme or metrical pattern, for instance, which he would expect a majority of individuals to replicate. He is not a neutral critic. He does not account, in his assertions, for the possibility of Deaf readers or writers. In fact, he directly upholds a hearing-centric theory of poetic mastery, writing unapologetically about “the ear one needs” in order to participate in certain literary communities and avowing, in passing, that “a string of sounds can be objectively measured for euphony or cacophony.”<sup>11</sup> Of traditional sound-based approaches to poetic composition and analysis he adds, “I’ll admit that I have a hard time respecting any poet, whatever their other strengths, who doesn’t show some aptitude in this regard.” In all these viewpoints, he sits at an opposite extreme from Kolb and Gewirtz and embodies much of what they critique. Yet he also crucially mirrors them insofar as the impetus for his writing is a feeling of hearing-related marginalization. It is on account of how he hears that he finds our methods for teaching and talking about poetry functionally limited.

Mohammad is a contemporary hearing poet drawn especially to the work of writers like Robert Creeley, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian, and as such he finds himself struggling to characterize certain aspects of his reading experience. These aspects broadly fall under the category of radical, abrupt, and recurring subversions of his syntactic expectations—produced by lines that break off mid- or pre-thought, voices introduced and abandoned without warning, grammar stripped of clarifying function—and he senses a sonic dimension to how he processes each subversion. The term he most prefers for the overall effect is Silliman’s “torque,” which he eventually defines (with some borrowing from Hejinian) as “a concentric pressure imposed on the flow of the poem, displacing the cadences the reader expects to hear and forcing the brain to adapt to these disjunctive skips.”<sup>12</sup> To create torque in one’s writing (or to perceive and grapple with torque in one’s reading) requires, per Mohammad, a set of hearing-based skills that exceed those typically associated with poetry. But as he attempts to elaborate further on these skills, he slips increasingly into abstraction and equivocation. He can only define “cadence” vaguely as a feeling of “falling toward closure” (something he admits need not reside in or rely on sound), and he offers no explanation either for how a poet comes to anticipate (and so thwart) a reader’s cadential expectations or for how a reader becomes, in turn, able to “adapt” once thwarted. Instead, he writes:

The best way I can think to put it is this: the ear one needs in order to critique the “music” of poets like Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, et al., is one that is alive (consciously or unconsciously) to the usual elements of assonance, consonance, cadential patterning, and so forth, *and* able to deal with radical syncopation or elision at the level of both sound and meaning.<sup>13</sup>

The result is a would-be definitive list of perceptual capacities undermined even in its framing. “Music” appears, seemingly out of thin air, to describe the sound content of a poem, and it is telling that Mohammad, in using scare quotes, seems as much to recognize the term’s lack of traction as to maintain its relevance. He then introduces “alive” as a similarly ambiguous critical term, determining that aliveness may happen “consciously or unconsciously” to the same end (fitness to critique the poems at hand), and so opens a door onto a whole slew of additional questions and uncertainties. What, for instance, is the functional difference between being unconsciously alive to something like

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<sup>11</sup> Mohammed, “The Poet’s Ear” (Part IV).

<sup>12</sup> Mohammed, “The Poet’s Ear” (Part III).

<sup>13</sup> Mohammed, “The Poet’s Ear” (Part IV).

assonance and being ignorant of or otherwise insensitive to it? If one is unconsciously alive to these things, does this not mean one lacks the tools and ability to articulate one's experience? And if unconscious aliveness is a standard for excelling as a critic, is there no responsibility on the part of a critic to investigate the quality of their aliveness?

Implicit in Mohammad's framing is his equation of a reader's ability to critique a poem in its dimension as heard sound with a reader's ability to notice and attribute value to that dimension. Namely, if one reads a poem by Hejinian and remarks on it as, in part, an experience of discrete sonic moments or forms of mastery, one reveals sensitivity to her writing in a way that in fact sanctions further authoritative engagement. What saves these remarks from "fictive utterance" are genuine feelings of difference and connection, and the distinct gatekeeping quality of Mohammad's rationale arises, I would wager, from a genuine desire to be witnessed and recognized in all his readerly capacities. If "an ear for poetry" implies exclusion of Deaf poets and readers at one end, it also tends to imply, at the other, a very narrow set of parameters about what poetry is and how it can be heard. Even among stereotypically hearing poets and readers, these parameters can sow division, a sense of exclusion, and a desire to stake out more ground. Just as the reliance on "good ear" proclamations reveals a need to recognize and express consensus among readers, the rhetoric of "the ear one needs" underscores a wish to preserve and elevate what feels special about reading communities and individual experiences of sensitivity ("aliveness") to a poem or grouping of words. Mohammad's "best...way of putt[ing] it" demonstrates the ongoing difficulty faced by many hearing poets and readers to convey what they feel, on a gut level, to be true: that they are sensitive, that they are "alive," that their sensitivity, their aliveness, *matters*. Yet it must also be acknowledged that self-preserving convictions about what is and must be true often result in the communicative defensiveness (metaphorical slipperiness) that prevents a more inclusive, more concretely honest dialogue about poetry from taking place.

In his efforts, concerns, and convolutions, Mohammad is far from alone. In 2006, Marjorie Perloff, then president of the Modern Language Association (MLA), chose "the sound of poetry, the poetry of sound" as the Association's annual convention theme and Presidential Forum topic. This—coupled with the titular imperative of her Presidential Address, "It Must Change"—was meant to be a statement of some magnitude, a shot across the bow of what Perloff perceived to be the "large-scale indifference to sound structure in the current discourse on poetry."<sup>14</sup> In her introduction to a subsequent volume of essays featuring some of the field's most prominent thinkers (also titled *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* and co-edited by Craig Dworkin), Perloff further clarified her position in terms of two "fairly simple and self-evident propositions": that poetry "inherently involves the structuring of sound" and that "however central the sound dimension is to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected."<sup>15</sup> While many scholars objected to Perloff's accusations of neglect, they tended to agree with her chief assertions about sound. The essays collected in Perloff and Dworkin's volume are notable not only for converging with respect to the uninterrogated value they place on literal acts of hearing but also for diverging in what they demonstrate of individual listening and reading experiences, desires, and capacities. Perloff marks out a spectrum of incomplete modes of engagement—from "conventional prosodic studies" at one end to what she terms "'scientific' prosodic analysis" at the other. As she notes, the former (which includes the catalog of "materially verifiable claims" Mohammad wishes to expand) "cannot allow

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<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>15</sup> Perloff, "Introduction," 1.

for the difference individual performance makes, much less for variants of individual and culturally determined reception.”<sup>16</sup> Rhyme, for instance, is frequently spoken about as a stable and readily identifiable element, but whether two words rhyme for a particular reader or, for that matter, generate significance for a reader on account of their rhyme, can depend on the reader’s background and relationship to the language at hand. Then too, the more minutely empirical models for literary study brought into the field by linguists and rhetoricians can, from her standpoint, run the risk of too fine-grained a level of attention. “[T]he more thorough the description of a given poem’s rhythmic and metrical units, its repetition of vowels and consonants, its pitch contours,” she suggests, “the less we may be able to discern the larger contours of a given poet’s particular practice, much less a period style or cultural construct.”<sup>17</sup>

Perloff, along with the many other critics featured in her volume and attracted to her convention theme, longs for the flexibility to consider sound with both intricacy and expansiveness. She wants to account more precisely for aspects of hearing and of poetry that are not captured by older analytical methods (an accounting that would include new vocabulary such as Mohammad’s “torque”), but she also wants to retain some possibility of generalization, to be able to make overarching statements that gesture at shared experience and to leave room for the continued usage of terms that are rooted in the field but shifting in impact and definition. As Dworkin acknowledges in his companion introduction, “sound” is a descriptor we cannot do without, but the debate over where and how sound is located in poetry—what comprises it, to what extent it contributes to or evades meaning for individual readers, to what extent it is integral to any given poem’s identity as poetry—is and should be conceived of as substantial and ongoing. Along these lines, both Perloff and Dworkin are also adamant, though with somewhat differing emphases, that poetry’s historical rootedness in song and association with music not narrowly dictate how we come to speak of poetic sound now. Perloff emphasizes how our definitions of lyric poetry in particular have moved away from any unifying insistence on “lyric” as representative of or akin to music in some form and suggests that contemporary critical approaches must account for this departure. Dworkin, meanwhile, attends to how “music” is itself a term that has undergone tremendous flux and recontextualization over the past century. Recognizing the frequency with which music is used as a shortcut to discuss poetry in terms of sound, as well as the tendency (as is the case with Mohammad) to refer to “music” and “prosody” almost interchangeably, both move to privilege scholarship that is specific and articulate about the category of music implied and about the deeper connections a conception of music may offer our reading of a poet or poem.

As a vision for how scholarship about sound with respect to poetry can move forward, therefore, *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* is curious, informed, and detailed. Although it frames the discussion of poetry solely as the domain of hearing readers and writers, it is also broadly aware of and reluctant to replicate critical expedients that serve only to obfuscate the diversity of ways in which a reading experience may or may not also be a hearing one. One gets the sense that, had Kolb been present at the 2006 convention, there would have been some bid to recognize and represent her perspective as well. But when we step back and notice that a decade has passed since these ideas were circulated, it can be difficult to determine that the field has evolved. In 2008, *PMLA* published a series of essays on the state of lyric studies, several of which used Perloff’s 2006 theme to project a more communal, research-and-discipline-rich future for poetry scholarship.

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<sup>16</sup> Perloff, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>17</sup> Perloff, “Introduction,” 2

Yopie Prins, seizing on the need for better historical and genre-specific grounding for our writing about sound, imagined the pursuit of such grounding as “a labor for many critics to undertake, a collaborative enterprise that will approach lyric reading differently, differentially, for dissonance as well as resonance.”<sup>18</sup> Oren Izenberg, lobbying for greater interdisciplinarity and conversation across fields, wrote that responding to poetry in any guise may be readily equated with

mak[ing] our own experiences, however idiosyncratic, openly accessible, taking them out of our heads to offer them as real knowledge about the world. In pointing as readers to our literal experiences of the poem, to their transformative operations on or enchantments of our experience, we predict the existence of other occasions for experience like this one, though what this one is must remain undefined until the next instance. At the same time, we imagine the possibility that our experiences are not solitary but are rather a way of speaking in a language that others might well come to share.<sup>19</sup>

There is an exuberance and a generosity here, as well as a seeming willingness to establish personal vulnerability and uncertainty as literary-critical necessities. However, the promise of open accessibility, particularly concerning our “literal experiences” of a poem’s relationship to sound, has proved far more easily tendered than it can be fulfilled. The rise of sound studies as a robust interdisciplinary field in its own right has provided us with ample additional lenses and collaborative opportunities through which to understand, write about, and explore sound perception as it pertains to literature, but individual literary critics are, on the whole, still more likely to fall back on the descriptive frameworks they were taught than to substantially revise or recontextualize their approach. As evidenced by Mohammad’s essays and Kolb’s account, statements like Izenberg’s do not (yet) describe a wholesale truth about literary study so much as they express a long-held wish for how literary study might be perceived. The lack of a shift is even more pronounced in the classroom, where pedagogical strategies concerning poetry often remain undifferentiated from those in circulation over a century ago. The feeling of having shared a literal experience often stands in for all but the most cursory of inquiries into whether real knowledge of an experience has in fact been transmitted and, if so, to what extent. Just as dispelling unhelpful metaphors is a different labor from articulating the content they once gestured toward, “imagin[ing] the possibility that our experiences are not solitary” differs considerably from embarking on the communicative tasks that would make them less so.

The simplest and most ready explanation for why many of the aspirations of scholarship have not made it further into practice is that sound—perceiving it, describing it, critiquing it—is extraordinarily complex. It seems both tempting and necessary to relieve individual literary critics and instructors from the task of attempting a true bird’s-eye view of the topic and to vouch instead for the proliferation of critical readings that are collaborative less in practice than by way of their proximity to one another in journals and at conferences. By continuing to research, read, and write about sound and poetry, each in our own way, we can conceive of ourselves as advancing our collective understanding. But however well this may work in the abstract, it isn’t an effective approach to transforming our everyday speech and pedagogy. As our methods for conceiving of and

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<sup>18</sup> Yopie Prins, “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and ‘The Science of English Verse,’” 234.

<sup>19</sup> Oren Izenberg, “Poems Out of Our Heads,” 221.

evaluating sound (both generally and with respect to poetry) have grown more diverse, and as we've undertaken more divergent forms of research into previously uninvestigated aspects of sound production and perception, we've also carried forward the notion that hearing is deeply mysterious and difficult to quantify. From afar, recognitions of complexity and assertions of mysteriousness can look very similar; up close, however, the latter uses the diffuse nature of sound-related inquiry, whether wittingly or otherwise, as an excuse not to ask what is knowable about how we hear.

From my many conversations over the years with students, teachers, strangers, and colleagues, my sense is that we cling to the mysterious out of both habit and fear. For those steeped in "good ear" metaphors, who have, whatever their individual experience of sound, been taught to believe that certain ears have more access, the idea that one could be broadly curious about one's hearing has often been preempted by resignation to or glorification of one's apparent ranking with respect to others. We receive descriptions of and feedback on our hearing from countless sources, many of them seemingly authoritative, and these characterizations tend to gel in such a way as to prevent further inquiry. For those who believe themselves literally capable of hearing more, the notion that others may hear less can seem both threatening and intolerable.

In the same *PMLA* essay, Izenberg asserts (deliberately affirming and echoing Perloff) that to "miss out" on "phenomena like alliteration" and other hearing-incumbent elements of poetic form is, in fact, "to miss out on the seductions and enchantments that draw readers and that move poetry beyond mere instrumentality."<sup>20</sup> The pivotal word in this assertion is "the," which allows for no distinction between sound perception and readerly connection, and no variation in individual hearing potential. "Missing out" is therefore implied to be a choice that would cost us our contact with everything that makes poetry meaningful and human. The push to think of poetry increasingly and explicitly in terms of sound often (if not directly or consciously) frames sensitivity to and knowledge about sound as something anyone with the right motivations can take up—something, indeed, that anyone wanting to respect poetry as an object of attention has the *obligation* to take up. Izenberg's assertion as a whole constitutes a high stakes warning not to stray from the methods of instruction and analysis that made Kolb's introduction to poetry so isolating and her teachers' insistence on listening so ubiquitous. But what seems on the surface to be concern for the richness of others' reading experiences seems at base also a fear of being isolated in the perceptions that bring us joy. If others cannot be taught to hear in the same way, then the prospect of "speaking in a language that others might well come to share" shrinks exponentially, as does its accompanying optimism.<sup>21</sup> Preserving a conception of hearing as fundamentally mysterious protects us on the one hand from confronting our differences and, on the other, from questioning them.

The trouble with "an ear for poetry" is not simply its perpetuation of audist presumptions or its uninformative way of describing feelings of consensus between certain readers or reading communities; the trouble is also its separation of "ears" for poetry from "ears" for other things, leading many to wonder what aspects of their hearing are in fact admissible as "real knowledge of the world" and to compartmentalize their observations as a precursor to conversation. Yet the process of developing and sharing theories of sound with respect to poetry (including developing and sharing theories about how a particular poet uses sound within their oeuvre) is necessarily preceded and wholly undergirded by all the things we have learned or believed about sound, by all the ways we inhabit and experience our bodies, and by all the ways we have learned to hear. Every poem or

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<sup>20</sup> Izenberg, "Poems Out of Our Heads," 217.

<sup>21</sup> Izenberg, "Poems Out of Our Heads," 221.

reading of a poem is in part the product of a theory of sound posited by an experience of hearing, and these experiences of hearing are not in fact opaque. Whether the theory is that sound perception is not vital to poetry as a medium (Kolb) or that sound is absolutely integral and should hold a central place in literary theory and pedagogy (Perloff and others)—whether the theory is posited directly or through passing statements revealing belief—it behooves us to be curious about the specific circumstances that have led each theory (and by extension each “ear,” literal and figurative) to form. It behooves us because curiosity at this level is our only way to better understand what can and cannot be said about hearing more generally and to arrive at forms of communication that would better support our diverse descriptive needs.

### Sonic Objects and the Performance Fallacy

Beyond, or perhaps in addition to, our lack of representative criticism from deaf scholars like Kolb, there are three main tendencies that seem to me at the root of how our discourse on sound and sound studies more broadly has failed to evolve. The first is what I’ve described thus far: the tendency to assume (or simply hope) that others hear as we hear and therefore to lack the shared knowledge and vocabulary—or even the impulse to seek out a shared knowledge and vocabulary—that might either disrupt this assumption or help us cope with its disruption. The second, which I’ve touched on obliquely, is the tendency to treat sounds as objects, to fail to distinguish between an individual’s perception of a sound and the sound itself, and so to speak in terms of sounds as comparable objects rather than as objects defined in part by idiosyncratic bodies and ears. And the third, on which I’ll elaborate shortly, is our tendency to take a person’s performance of sound as indication of what and how they hear. This last is what I term the “performance fallacy,” and I’ll argue that our movement away from it demands a far more personal approach to criticism.

For those who care about the sound of a text, the temptation to consider text within the framework of strictly comparable sonic objects is understandably quite strong. Even when translating across language barriers, hearing readers and writers are driven to mention the *voice* of an author, the *rhythm* of a work, and the *tone*, which we may laud a translator for having *captured*. Linguistic studies by Roman Jakobson, Benjamin Harshav, and Reuven Tsur foreground the semantic content of poetic sound in part by noting cross-cultural similarities in how we characterize types of speech sounds, and by suggesting there may be something explicitly quantifiable about the way text operates on our hearing, or about the choices writers make when they are seeking particular effects. As Tsur notes in his book, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, although traditional poetics does not tend to account for the specific experiences of and ideas about hearing we bring to a text, it does represent a commonly held stance concerning the existence of shared meaning derived from sound perception. Most hearing individuals bring a lot of confidence to the task of identifying and categorizing speech sounds, whether or not they are aware of doing so, and there is enough interpretive overlap to suggest—as Tsur very cautiously puts it—that “the various language sounds have certain general potentialities of meaningful impression and can be combined with other elements so that they impress the reader as if they expressed some specific meaning.”<sup>22</sup> But too often the experience of interpretive overlap, which can span everything from shared identification and pronunciation of a sound to shared explanation for the sound’s existence or shared sense of the

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<sup>22</sup> Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, 1.

sound's impact, becomes a feeling of certainty about the location of sound wholly outside of ourselves. This then translates into literary criticism that declines to differentiate between the potential of a text to suggest sound to a reader and the sense that it absolutely does.

"In epics composed, read, recited, and recorded between 1917 and 1960," writes Adalaide Morris, "sounds cut in, rise, then fade away as other sounds intrude, as if we were tapping into a party line on a municipal phone exchange, spinning down a radio dial, or sampling a stack of records." She continues,

In ink, on air, miked, muted, magnetized, digitalized, or virtualized, sound has the versatility and insistence of water. Fixed in phonetic writing, thawed by reading, scattered in speech, stored for replay on tape, record, disk, or drive, sounds pass through multiple phases, forms, and structures, all of which claim our ear but few of which gain a hearing.<sup>23</sup>

These are compelling, evocative sentences, in line with critical efforts to emphasize the constancy, ubiquity, and power of heard experience. However, Morris's description of sound is also deeply problematic. It suggests that sound, like water, can be fixed exactly into place—that phonetic writing contains it as well as a tape recorder, and that any reading of such writing has the effect of a thaw, an uncorrupted return or retrieval. To suggest that a sound "passes through multiple phases, forms, and structures" is to be unclear about the effects of that passage—most of which extend beyond a mere change of format and are often arguably obfuscating or, to borrow a term from digital file compression, "lossy." When pressed, we commonly understand, for instance, that even a high fidelity recording of a sound is not the original sound, or that two different people reading the same poem out loud will never render it identically, no matter how carefully they match pronunciation. Yet we just as frequently speak as though these discrepancies are ultimately trivial and that the conversational expedient of pretending they do not exist has no lasting influence on our future expectations.

Also inaccurate is Morris's analogy that suggests modernist poems act on us as disparate sound bites. To sample a stack of records, or even to eavesdrop on a party line, is to encounter a series of what Pierre Schaeffer in 1936 dubbed "objets sonores," sounds made into objects on account of their being divorced from the originating means of their production.<sup>24</sup> Sound experienced in this fashion is still distinctly material. Like a particular thunderclap on a particular afternoon, it can be precisely measured and quantitatively described (though perhaps only using instruments apart from human ears!). Indeterminate as its source might be, it exists as a discrete and replicable unit, unaltered and unalterable by the interpretive work of its listener. But modernist texts are not mixtapes.

Woven through Tsur's study is the specter of linguistic difference—of the *incomparabilities* of languages, or of the sonic objects they appear to generate. The instance of some cross-cultural similarity in speech perception is by no means equivalent to a reliable, or even prevalent, similarity; in fact, the number of cases in which Tsur suggests a perceptual constant *within* a single language greatly outnumbers the number of cases in which a constant is observed *across* several languages. Crucially, even if certain spoken sounds register to us individually in a range of predictable ways,

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<sup>23</sup> Adalaide Morris, "Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. On the Air," 32.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*.

even if we can train ourselves to associate those sounds with word fragments on the page and to be conscious of our associations, the fact remains that the sounds do not exist in a text independently of our respective renderings. Furthermore, the sounds a text might be considered to evoke are not merely the domain of its words-as-speech. They are also the domain of what its words describe—sounds themselves or spaces in which sound may be contained. Individual readers therefore are responsible (whether consciously or otherwise) for the sounds they hear, and not merely with respect to name or number, but also, and especially, in terms of such elements as volume, character, and duration. Even onomatopoeic sounds—the “whhsssh, ttt” of a buzz saw in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, or the “zrr-hiss” of a rocket in H. D.’s *Trilogy*, two examples Morris gives of what she calls the “surround of sound” in modernist texts—are at best evocative of acoustic spaces that a hearing reader might imaginatively enter into.<sup>25</sup> Can we honestly say that someone who has never heard a buzz saw or a rocket would reliably discern, much less palpably “hear,” either of those sounds following the above textual renderings? Our perception of a poem’s acoustic space changes in accordance with our ability to recognize and imagine the sounds it potentially contains. Printed words are not sounds in and of themselves, and they are therefore incapable of “surrounding” a reader unaided. It is only the rapidity with which hearing readers have learned to connect the visual cue of a printed word to a set of likely sonic expressions—so rapid that it feels instantaneous and often occurs subconsciously—that leads us to think and believe otherwise.

This is not to say that modernist poets like Pound and H. D. did not *intend* for their readers to feel wholly immersed in an experience of poetry as sound. In many cases, and as I will later emphasize, the references to sound in their texts and the experiments with prosody they enacted emerged from conceptions of sound strongly akin to Morris’s own. Creative and critical oeuvres often reflect and reinforce one another, and this seems especially apparent when it comes to ideas about hearing. When writing about poets’ expectations for how their work will be heard, critics frequently reveal their own similar expectations. And when it comes to perceiving text in terms of comparable sonic objects, the experience of similarity tends to preclude further investigation. For critics working after the advent of audio recording and in an era abundant with poetry readings, the desire to avoid discrepant realities manifests most starkly in a reluctance to bring the literal sound of poets reading their own work into conversation with the imagined sound of texts read in isolation or with the theories of sound these texts, in isolation, appear to represent. It remains a common occurrence that a discussion of sound in poetry contains no direct mention of a poem’s performance history, and that critics, coming across a poet’s out-loud rendition of a work, might dismiss it as an unfortunate event or a passing novelty depending on their own impression of the poem’s sound content. Of course, not all literary critics fall under this category. Some of the support for Perloff’s 2006 convention theme came from poets and scholars such as Charles Bernstein, who had long expressed frustration over the field’s reluctance to teach, critique, and otherwise acknowledge audio recordings and other experiences of poets reading their own writing. For Bernstein, individual poems are best thought of as multifarious incommensurate performances, wherein an original printed text constitutes one performance, any alternate draft constitutes another, and so too does each reading a poet or reader gives, whether privately or in public. In his introduction to *Close Listening*, an anthology of critical reflections on the domain of poetry readings in particular, Bernstein rejects the notion of text as equivalent to fixed or fully predictable units of sound. “The work is not identical to any one graphical or performative realization of it,” he writes, “nor can it be equated with a totalized

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<sup>25</sup> Morris, “Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. On the Air,” 32.

unity of those versions or manifestations. The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence.”<sup>26</sup> Without an understanding of text as performance, without the give and take of imaginative possibility or personal preference as much affirmed as upended by alternate rendition, he suggests, we are not confronting poetry as it truly exists—as a series of demonstrations of the fluidity of language with respect to sound that cannot help but transform how we go on to hear.

To further his point, he offers the following disruptively emphasized sentence, a reminder to the reader that even familiar words of prose can be deconcretized to reveal and shift tightly held assumptions: “PERforMANCE readily allows FOR stressING (‘promotING’) unstressed SYLLABLES, INcluding prepOsitions, artiCLES, and conjunctIOnS—creATING SynCoPATed rHyThms, whiCH, onCE HEARd, are THEN cARRIED oVer by reaDERS INTO theIr oWN reAding of tHe teXt.”<sup>27</sup> In a separate essay, he writes:

I don’t teach writing workshops but reading workshops... No previous experience with poetry is necessary. More important is a willingness to consider the implausible, to try out alternative ways of thinking, to listen to the way language sounds before trying to figure out what it means, to lose yourself in a flurry of syllables and regain your bearings in dimensions otherwise imagined as out-of-reach, to hear how poems work to delight, inform, redress, lament, extol, oppose, renew, rhapsodize, imagine, foment...<sup>28</sup>

In Bernstein’s model of the poetry classroom, we give up any promise of sonic certainty and any focus on aural agreement in exchange for a kind of endless and permeable play. By compelling his students not only to “listen to the way language sounds before trying to figure out what it means,” but also to “lose yourself in a flurry of syllables,” he aims to alleviate the pressures (for hearing readers, at least) of right and wrong, good and bad. The only goal becomes to notice what and how one hears and to endeavor to hear differently from how one has heard before.

But Bernstein’s approach also emphasizes our reliance on performance for determinations about how to hear, and his focus on poems as omnidirectional pluralities can have the added effect of effacing the labor and complexity of the bodies that, on the one hand, perform, and on the other, listen. Because Bernstein affirms each out-loud performance as an equally valid rendition of a text, he finds no meaningful distinction between the poem and how it is performed, and he likewise is uninterested in distinguishing the performer from the performance. “The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet,” he writes; “it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work not the one who composed it.”<sup>29</sup> He even goes so far as to suggest that any resistance on the part of an audience member to the experience of a performed poem may be understood as a rejection of the poem itself. “Perhaps it makes most sense to say that if you don’t like a poet’s reading it is because you don’t like the poetry,” he offers. “There are no poets whose work I admire whose readings have failed to engage me, to enrich my hearing of the work.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, “Introduction,” *Close Listening*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Bernstein, “Introduction,” *Close Listening*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Bernstein, *My Way*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Bernstein, “Introduction,” *Close Listening*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Bernstein, “Introduction,” *Close Listening*, 12.

This last is an interesting note about Bernstein presented as if it were a wholesale truth; it suggests that hearing, specifically being enriched or engaged in one's hearing, is a matter of disposition. What it conceals are the details of enrichment and engagement, the spectrum on which these details doubtless lie, and, even more importantly, the forms of training, exposure, and relationship to one's body that make each detail possible. When Bernstein describes individual poets' voices (T. S. Eliot's "eerily depersonalized vocal style," Gertrude Stein's "all-over, modulating or cubist resonances," Jackson Mac Low's "immaculate enunciation of constructed word patterns"<sup>31</sup>), for instance, it is through his own judgments offered as fact—judgments that, due to their referential and comparative language, only become accessible as descriptions of sound if one has also heard the recordings in question, and perhaps not even then. A similar concealment happens in Bernstein's description of his reading workshop, wherein the only caveat for participation is a "willingness to consider." This makes being able to hear differently and being able to "lose" oneself the hallmarks of will rather than of capacity, and it overlooks the circumstances that must already be in place for a reader before they can conceive of themselves as either willing or able. If the tendency to perceive poems as fixed sonic objects flattens our sense of each poem's acoustic potential and establishes experiential norms that can exclude many readers, the opposite tendency to welcome all readings often fails to account for the ways in which our hearing is, and does feel, specific, limited, impossible.

This is what brings me to my discussion of what I earlier introduce as the performance fallacy. The term, as I define it, refers to our tendency to equate a person's use or performance of sound with the way in which they process and understand it. A classic, perhaps extreme, example is of shouting, dramatically slowing, or grammatically distorting a verbal response to someone who, in asking a question, reveals a lack of spoken language fluency. We mistake our belabored hearing experience of their speech as an indication of how they themselves need and want to hear, though it can feel quite clear, when positions are reversed, that our ability to comprehend may far outpace our ability to make ourselves understood. What and how we hear internally, the discriminations we make and details we notice as listeners, can differ significantly from what we produce or are able to produce as an account of our hearing. Moreover, what we hear internally can shape how we perceive our own speech or sound-making in ways that are not transparent to others' listening. Yet we rarely ask whether or not our account of a poet's out-loud reading of a work corresponds with that poet's internal sense of how the work sounds or of the sounds they imagine the work to contain. We rarely ask others for accounts of how they hear themselves, and we rarely share how we are hearing them. And in the absence of these questions, we shy away from what may be the most difficult and vital aspect of any conversation about sound: how we process sound in our bodies—how our bodies, which we do not choose, but which we can be given some tools to explore and understand, lead us to hear and to conceptualize hearing.

Because our literary-critical history with respect to sound is an ableist one, it is difficult to ask or receive a question about the body without interpreting within it a standard for hearing and, consequently, a standard for being. Metaphor is as much an aid to expressing genuinely felt capacities as it is a shelter from dealing with bodily uncertainty or the stigma of limitation; though better knowledge about ourselves and others might free us from some of the viciousness and isolation that come with inaccurate assumptions, the work to be wiser can feel too invasive. But to be in conversation with and about our hearing experiences without eliding our hearing and sound-making

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<sup>31</sup> Bernstein, "Introduction," *Close Listening*, 12.

bodies is, from my standpoint, a crucial step toward developing a critical mode that revolves around access. Whether we are broadly deemed “hearing” or otherwise—whether our physical apparatus for encountering and processing sound functions similarly to or differently from those of our closest colleagues, companions, and peers—there are countless ways in which we each cannot and do not hear. To dispel some of the haze of metaphor, to move away from our reliance either on the performance fallacy or on a theory of text as sonic object, is to admit, with far greater frequency, when something is not heard. And, more challenging still, when hearing or hearing differently is not possible or not desired.

For these reasons, I am convinced this writing can only be critical if it is also unambiguously personal. It must reveal some of the process of going inward, of investigating and documenting the formation of a perceiving self, and it must locate its central inquiries as a product of that self.

### **An Anecdote About My Ear**

In high school and college, I was told I had “perfect pitch”—the ability to know precisely, without any other point of reference, where a heard pitch falls relative to the twelve distinct notes of the Western classical scale. I could identify such notes, it seemed, on cue. A simple test for this trait is to stand the listener with her back to a piano and strike notes at random, which the listener is then expected to name. This I could do. As a music major, having perfect pitch (also termed “absolute pitch”) at times means different coursework, different groupwork, and different musicianship expectations. It has the ring of a superpower (those with it are inclined to claim it), but the actual scope of what it makes possible is often unclear. Once I was reprimanded for confusing the first and second bassoon parts in my by-ear transcription of the opening measures of a symphony. As my professor later acknowledged, an ability to identify pitches is not also an ability to intuit note distribution between identical-sounding instruments, yet similar misapprehensions persisted. Often, I was expected to complete my work much faster, as if note identification did not itself take time.

It was this insistence on speed that made me increasingly curious about my experience relative to others. One peer, I realized, could not only name notes instantaneously but also identify, down to minute fractions of intervals (cents), how flat or sharp they were; another found even minor fluctuations in intonation (the faithfulness of a performed note to its expected frequency) not merely glaring but intolerable. My hearing, on the whole, is both less informative and less affronted. In fact, when pressing myself to think in detail about what happens for me between the sounding of a note and the identification of a pitch, I find it to be less a case of lightning instinct than of rapid translation. When I am playing regularly, I find I grow so connected to the physical experience of playing music that I can often feel a note in my fingers the moment one enters my ears. I can feel, that is, the position my hands would need to take on an instrument in order for a particular pitch to sound, and so arrive, by recognition of physical impulse, at a note’s identity. This responsiveness seems further heightened by my specific instruments: clarinet, which allows each note of the scale to feel markedly different in my hands (each finger has its own separate task of exposing or covering a hole), and violin, which requires me to find all notes along a set of unmarked strings. In the latter case, after substantial training, it becomes possible to learn the feeling of relatively fine differences in sound and vibration. I also grew up with a piano in the house, which gave my earliest experiences of pitch a strong visual correlation: an entire complement of notes laid out distinctly, from low to high

along a linear plane. Sitting at the piano and hearing a melody played elsewhere in the room, I can often strike the corresponding notes—my fingers guided to the keys as if individually magnetized—before I can say out loud what they are.

Researchers have long known that perfect pitch, whether traditionally or more comprehensively assessed, does not actually describe a perfectly homogeneous experience of pitched sound. Even from study to study, there is significant variation in what passes for “absolute,” with some researchers introducing qualifiers like “quasi,” “pseudo,” “latent,” and “implicit” to describe those who, despite approaching (and at times exceeding) a study’s speed and accuracy thresholds, do not seem to arrive at or understand their identifications in the same way. But as is the case with much about hearing, the research is ongoing, quick to change, and rarely widely enough circulated to alter how we understand and speak of one another or ourselves. In a 1990 *New York Times* article detailing his research into the possible genetic dimensions of perfect pitch, psychiatrist and musician Joseph Profita describes his own hearing experience as follows: “The minute I hear a note, I know it. A single note takes on a real nature, like an object. An A is an A just the way a table is a table.”<sup>32</sup> This is not how I hear. In my life, identifying pitches might be most readily described as a Pavlovian response; it feels instinctive, but I suspect this is in large part on account of repeated, remembered physical association, subject to numerous limitations. To name the notes of a symphonic chord, for instance, I have to sit with my memory of the performed sound and gradually imagine how I might play each of the pitches it contains.

I share this anecdote because it offers some insight into the perspective and experience that grounds my work. It is an example of the performance fallacy (in this case, my performed relationship to sound suggested I was capable of hearing with a degree of sensitivity to pitch and intonation that was in fact beyond me), and it is an example of how our language about sound, which (as I earlier mention) differs substantially from discipline to discipline, community to community, can shape or curtail our curiosity about our own hearing. It is an example that highlights the difference between sound characterized and perceived as an object and sound characterized and perceived in terms of a listener. It is also an example of how even attributes that seem instinctive or preordained may in fact be the product of regular influence, immersion, and training, and how unlikely it is that any one experience of sound may be traced back to a single physiological or environmental trigger. In 1990, Profita, despite having no formal background in genetics, felt he was on the verge of establishing a definite genetic link and went so far as to suggest there might be such a thing as an absolute pitch gene.<sup>33</sup> In 2007, a team of scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, raised a similar hypothesis, but with the added caveat that the gene must be “activated” by early music training and that other environmental factors likely play a role. Just two years later, after performing a series of whole-genome linkage studies, the same UCSF team largely abandoned their initial theory (and Profita’s with it). Their results showed likely linkages to a variety of chromosomes (genetic heterogeneity) but no statistically significant connection to a single gene overall.<sup>34</sup> Now, perfect pitch is attributed to myriad combined influences that, if likely aided by genetics, are also largely environmental and include everything from early musical training and extensive ongoing musicianship to music education methods and tonal

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<sup>32</sup> Sandra Blakeslee, “Perfect Pitch.”

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Profita et al. “Perfect Pitch.”

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Theusch et al. “Genome-Wide Study of Families with Absolute Pitch Reveals Linkage to 8q24.21 and Locus Heterogeneity.”

language fluency.<sup>35</sup> It is linked to heightened auditory memory, which includes memory for speech sounds, in some studies, and to a functionally different brain in others.<sup>36</sup>

As an orchestral musician one can go decades talking daily about sound without articulating the deeper impact of that experience or understanding, beyond pure instrumental mechanics, how either sound production or sound reception come about. At the same time, nothing is more emphasized than training and practice—the natural complement to the question “can you hear?” is the affirmation (and occasional threat) “you will learn”—and one’s body, which is for so many sounds responsible, is constantly under scrutiny. The aim is to be able to produce on command whatever series of sounds is asked of one, to be efficient and precise, to notice and immediately correct unintended or undesired differences. Early on in my training, I learned to think of sounds as contoured, often radically, by people, and of the notation before me as a detailed sketch, not the final blueprint, and certainly not the building. A conductor comes in, halts the proceedings, says “no, that should be short” or “can you make that softer,” and I am aware of my ear’s subordination to another’s, of needing to show reverence for the sound I am now performing, which is not the sound I chose for myself. Through my performance of music, I’ve learned that self-proclaimed “good ears” disagree. I’ve rehearsed the same symphony over the course of five different seasons, with five different orchestras, under five different conductors, changing my mind each time about how to play and what to listen for, and I’ve watched my hearing develop to perceive with a feeling of objectivity things that once felt arbitrary and impossible to notice (I am flat, I am sharp, I am not quite matching the articulation of the person next to me).

There is no poem I have read or recited more than most of the pieces I have ever played, and so it is that this project cannot perceive hearing separately from learning, or sound separately from recursive self-reflection. Like Bernstein, I am invested in the variation a performance of any kind represents. Whether or not what I perceive is what was initially intended, I believe my perceptions contribute meaningfully to my experience because they cannot help but include something I identify as new. When I investigate the origin of this personal belief, however, I find it tied to all the ways in which I am constantly scanning for novelty and, by extension, all the forms of noticing I feel strongly equipped to employ. I am aware, that is, of the richness of my prior experience, much of it musical, which I have been trained and supported in remembering, and which acts as a sieve on my present moment, allowing me not only to acknowledge my expectations but also to locate and contextualize them with respect to my observations.

In the coming chapters, my aim is to cultivate awareness of this kind where it has been submerged within literary texts and literary-critical practice. Using a handful of figures whose lives, communities, and readerships owed much to public and personal conceptions of their “ears,” I examine how our beliefs about hearing (born of our respective experiences with sound) impact what we think language can do. The writers featured here—Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens—are those I gravitated toward as a young undergraduate, intrigued by their respective visions of a world transformed by poetry, feeling strongly at the time that I could grasp what they were saying and hear them as they intended to be heard. They, too, had grown up surrounded by music, by the Western classical works and instruments of my childhood and

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<sup>35</sup> Raphael B. C. Leite, Sergio A. Mota-Rolim, and Claudio M. T. Queiroz. “Music Proficiency and Quantification of Absolute Pitch.”

<sup>36</sup> Diana Deutsch and Kevin Dooley, “Absolute Pitch Is Associated with a Large Auditory Digit Span”; S. C. Van Hedger et al., “Auditory Working Memory Predicts Individual Differences in Absolute Pitch Learning”; Seung-Goo Kim and Thomas R. Knösche. “On the Perceptual Subprocess of Absolute Pitch.”

adolescence, and I identified intensely with the adance and freedom of their writing about sound: the casual references they made to listening and to concert-going, the at-times highly particularized, at-times semi-mystical pride of place they gave the ear. But after spending time in front of classrooms, testing their poems and theories of sound against the multifarious bodies and minds of other readers, I found my interest shifting to the slipperiness of their terms, the intractability of their assumptions. My time among their archives likewise revealed the uncertainty and compartmentalization of their self-expression. All three continue to be defined by their seemingly innate abilities to at once bridge and move beyond centuries of accumulated acoustic sensibilities and formal techniques, and their ideas about hearing persist in (and may even be said to shape) contemporary scholarship. When we begin to question how these ideas developed and what they represent for each poet individually, however, we arrive at quite a different story.

Central to my project is an extended examination of Pound in particular. The quintessential “ear for poetry,” Pound spent much of his life being lauded for how he heard, composed, and responded to language. Even after his arrest and indictment for treason—the eventual consequence of his vocal support for Mussolini’s regime—the most prominent of his peers, in disavowing his politics, could not help but defend his verse. John Berryman, writing a few years after Pound’s indictment, held him on par with Shakespeare: “I scarcely know what to say of Pound’s ear. Fifteen years of listening have not taught me that it is inferior to the ear of the author of *Twelfth Night*.”<sup>37</sup> Charles Olson wrote the following around the same time: “It is as though Pound never had illusion, was born without an ear of his own, was, instead, an extraordinary ear of an era, and did the listening for a whole time, the sharpest sort of listening, from Dante down.”<sup>38</sup> Yet Pound’s broader writings demonstrate both the biases and the aptitudes of an ear (or experience of sound) less immaculately formed than diversely constituted and (at times) haphazardly trained. By tracing his hearing development through published work and correspondence, as well as through extensive archival materials, I demonstrate how environmental, cultural, physiological, and linguistic influences prefigure not only the sound of a poem but also its accompanying discourse.

The crux of this demonstration is my reading of Pound’s unpublished, aborted manuscript, “Dissertation on Rhythm,” which contains rare autobiographical musings concerning his evolving relationship to his own hearing. Pound derived most of his convictions about sound and poetry from his many experiences of music, but he struggled intensely to communicate these convictions to peers and even to friends. Though critical accounts of Pound’s hearing ability tend to describe it as gifted for poetry, they are equally likely to find it damaged or inept for any and all musical pursuits, and to Pound this comes to seem both an accurate and an impossible (intolerable) characterization. In addition to shedding light on the particular idiosyncrasies of his ear, the “Dissertation” manuscript—unexamined and absent from scholarship prior to my own research—marks a crucial moment of differentiation, for Pound, between the ability of notation (text, musical score) to dictate performance and the role of the performer as the interpretive vessel through which all notation must pass. Although he abandoned the document, its ideas echo and prefigure countless moments in his poetry and writings; they also frame my reading of several sections from Pound’s most significant work, *The Cantos*.

As much as this project features Pound, however, I want to emphasize that it is not ultimately (from my perspective, at least) *about* him. Nor is it about the other figures who appear.

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<sup>37</sup> John Berryman, “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” 389.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Olson, “GrandPa, GoodBye,” 146.

Rather, I'd like to think that the few aspects of literary life, work, and scholarship I highlight here offer us opportunities to revise and retrain some of our expectations for what writing about sound with respect to poetry can look like. By concerning ourselves with how individuals learn (and, thus, with how teaching occurs), we can develop a critical style that frames conversations about pedagogy, ability, and mastery as conversations about access. That the individuals featured here in the process of learning are some of the weightiest figures of poetry's last century only suggests, I think, that there are no exceptions. "Modern poetry's acoustic educations" are, after all, no different from our own, in which we readers inhabit a world of sounds and writings about sound and received notions and potential experiences that have taught us variously—but rarely comprehensively—what hearing comprises. I'd like to propose that for hearing readers especially, learning to hear, learning *about* hearing, and learning to conceive of ourselves as idiosyncratic hearing subjects are three different if interrelated processes, each of which can and does profoundly shape our experience of poetry, and I want to understand how we can value and communicate all three within our critical and pedagogical apparatus.

### Listening for Distance

What I suggest, and what my readings embody, is a form of attention that might be called "distance listening": a mode of listening and critical analysis that, by my definition, interrogates and makes apparent individual capacities to perceive and imagine highly particularized acoustic conditions. These are conditions not merely of learned speech but also of temporally located environments, bodies, texts, and spaces. I am interested, that is to say, in the distances, literal and figurative, between the respective heard realities of reader and writer, as well as between the respective aural potentials of "performed" poem and printed page.

I offer this term as a complement to Franco Moretti's "distant reading," itself conceived as a big data, globally-minded alternative to "close reading"; Bernstein's "close listening," which plays on the idea of close reading to position poetry performance (what he alternately calls "audiotext") as a focus of study on par with original and published texts; and, to a lesser extent, "distant listening," which has emerged as the Moretti-inspired, big data counterpart to intimate analyses of audio recordings and other work based in sound. When Moretti introduced distant reading, which uses computers and algorithms to "read" many hundreds of thousands of texts in the interest of understanding whole genres, global reading cultures, and literary systems, he advocated for it by pointing to the solipsism of close reading practices. "You invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter," he wrote, going on to emphasize how distance could in fact be a "*condition of knowledge*." One gains knowledge by allowing some distance between oneself and one's object of study. In my work, I value the same phrase, but with different emphasis. Distance, in distance listening, is a *condition* of knowledge; by which I mean everything we hold as knowledge sets us at a distance from something else. If "close reading" and "distant reading" and "close listening" and "distant listening" mark out ends of a spectrum of engagement, then I am interested not in placing additional markers along the way but in grappling with the telescoping quality of the distance between points.

Distance listening is, for hearing readers, an active exercise requiring attention not only to what we perceive ourselves hearing but also to hearing *as* perception. It asks us to train our

recognition, wherever possible, of differences between listeners, to research and remember these differences, and to integrate an understanding of them, even if necessarily incomplete, into our narratives about others and ourselves. It acknowledges the shared vocabularies that lead to feelings of familiarity that then get mistaken simply for “how we hear” (an impossible, unwieldy, unhelpful, collective “we”). It values the potential for personal accounts and admissions to broaden the scope and responsibility of our practice, and it in fact commits us to sharing rather than obscuring details that could elucidate a way of reading. It sacrifices some of the joy of freely writing in the idiosyncratic modes most comfortable to us in favor of interrogating, framing, and communicating our idiosyncrasies. It acknowledges that when we treat words as blueprints for another’s hearing experience, even when those words come to us so designated, what we eventually build or imagine ourselves building is less a pristine reconstruction than an original creation revealing many of our own materials. It stresses that it is not enough merely (per Izenberg) to “offer [our literal experiences] as real knowledge about the world”; we must also be curious about how knowledge, particularly knowledge about hearing and sound, comes to feel real, whether to us or to anyone else. A distance listener, being a hearing reader, takes responsibility for defining poetry not in terms of sound but as an expressive medium that, for hearing readers, may feel especially potent on account of its potential to be heard.

I do not think these ideas are in any way new, but I do think we need to practice stating them plainly. Entering a room, perceiving a desired auditor standing some distance away, those of us who are hearing are likely to calculate, likely without thinking, how loud our voice must be to travel, to be received and fully heard. We may or may not recognize in that moment the many ways we have trained our body to perform sound, the many details we have gathered over a lifetime of rooms that subtly inform how we choose to speak. We are likely to expect success, but we are also likely to try again when we are wrong, to test, to experiment with how our voice projects or is formed in our body, to examine the materials of the room, to traverse the distance bodily if we cannot seem to do it vocally, and to confront the auditor and solve for our questions of production and reception. Distance listening as a critical stance or method mimics how we actually move through physical space, how we act out, react to, and modify our experiences of hearing in order to participate in our environments and venture further into the world.

Consequently, while I’ve stated above that this project is not ultimately about the individuals it features, it is absolutely about terms that can help us investigate individual experiences. I have chosen to focus on three terms in particular—“consonance,” “timbre,” and “imagination”—the first two of which carry both technical and metaphorical meanings with respect to sound, some with a greater history of prevalence in literary study than others. “Consonance,” for instance, can be defined narrowly in terms of the frequency ratios to which human ears may be physiologically inclined, or more expansively to include the pleasing experience of certain sounds and sound combinations. In many cases, it is used interchangeably with terms like “music,” “harmony,” “resonance,” and “euphony,” resulting in conflation that obfuscate the source of a sound’s familiarity and agreeability to a listener. In my next chapter, I explore how a critique of things we experience as “consonant” can expose the differences between explicit training, repeated exposure, momentary context, and longer-standing associations. I look at how the prevalence of Western classical music, both at the start of the twentieth century and still today, makes it a primary source of ear training for modernist writers and contemporary scholars, and I show how failing to account for this (or, as the case may also be,

accounting for it exclusively) can place hard limits on our ability to discriminate between hearing experiences that seem, but are in fact not, the same.

The term “timbre,” meanwhile, is one I’d like to offer to literary scholarship as a way of bridging the gap between perceiving unique or differentiating qualities within sound—including within a poet’s voice—and understanding the origins of that perception. Timbre may be defined as the set of perceivable auditory attributes that, for individual listeners, allow a sound to be identifiable in relation to a source. It may also be defined as the product of how one sound’s composite frequencies and compounded frequency ratios differ from another’s—how the force of a water droplet hitting tin from a certain distance produces frequencies that distinguish it from a similarly sized droplet hitting wood, and how this difference may seem negligible when contrasted, for instance, with the frequencies produced by a mallet striking a gong. But many of us, in hearing something that may be classified in terms of timbre, often refer to it simply and broadly in terms of sound or in terms of a personal synonym or metaphor that may conflate it with other attributes of sound perception. The chapter I dedicate to an exploration of timbre is therefore also the chapter in which I focus on Pound, tracing the convolutions in his descriptions of sound as a way of considering how such convolutions occur and how a conception of timbre (as distinct from terms like rhythm and pitch) might support their disentanglement. Through Pound, I also discuss how the immediacy of perceiving timbre, coupled with the density of associations that tend to develop for each individual around it, can fuel assumptions about the kind of hearing experience written (and even spoken) language will induce. It was on account of his experience of timbre, I imply—and of the paucity of his means for conceptualizing it—that Pound, among others, projected so much potency for poetry and poetic projects.

My third and final term, “imagination,” is one that does not in isolation imply sound but seems vital to our discussion of it, particularly with respect to poetry. It is a term I have already used casually to describe the neurocognitive processes that allow us to “hear” sound internally, whether as a recollection or as an invention derived from what we have heard before, but it is also a term Williams and Stevens independently prize to describe the way in which poetry can transform reality. By provoking us to imagine differently, in part through the stimulus and structure of perceiving words as sounds, poems, they suggest, come to impact our lives and to reinvent what we believe to be possible. But, as I aim to demonstrate through a few anecdotes and readings (first concerning Williams’s relationship with imagined sound and then concerning Stevens’s), this way of thinking tends to locate the trigger for imagination solely in the text as opposed to also in the reader. It implies that a poem, well-enough crafted, can turn its author’s expectations for what a reader will hear into what is actually, consistently heard, ignoring, in the process, the number of discrete resources, trainings, environments, and other circumstances that would need to be in place before a reader and an author’s experiences of language could align. I am interested in framing sonic imagination, therefore, as something highly particularized, reliant for its development on real and cumulative experiences of sound. And I want to know how we can recognize the labor and forms of access that precede individual imaginative acts, and make each as legible and transparent as we can before assuming which acts can be replicated.

A robust and diverse readership for poetry, I contend, relies heavily on the willingness of hearing poets, scholars, and educators to resist simply seeking out or subsisting on a community of sympathetic ears. The more we understand about how we hear and the differences that do distinguish us, the more, I would hope, we can approach one another without fear or expectation.

No project or piece of scholarly writing can account for every relevant, proliferating subtlety about sound perception or locate its figures and authors among them. But distance listening can keep us open and humble.

**“Read and learn, learn to hear.”**

Let me conclude this opening chapter by listening for distance and moving closer, in this way, to the materials and figures to come. As previewed in my epigraph, Williams once wrote to Pound, “The great thing you have to say to us, as poets, is: READ! Read and learn, learn to hear.” Taken in isolation, it may seem a rousing celebration and fond ventriloquism of a man known at least as much for his dedication to mentorship as for his sensitivity to sound in the context of literature. After all, Pound’s own slim textbook, *ABC of Reading*, contains, alongside dozens of tiered writing exercises and reading recommendations, a complementary exhortation: “LISTEN to the sound that it makes.”<sup>39</sup>

But on October 30, 1946, the date of Williams’s letter, Pound was serving out the first of what would be twelve years’ incarceration at St. Elizabeths Hospital for the criminally insane. Charged with treason three years earlier, he had been spared life imprisonment on account of an insanity plea that even his closest friends disbelieved. Pound’s brash, irascible nature, coupled with the severity of his crime—delivering hundreds of radio broadcasts in support of Mussolini’s fascist government—made it difficult for any to take his plea at face value or to find much relief in his lighter sentencing. As Williams wrote to Dorothy Shakespear (Pound’s wife and legal guardian) the same day, Pound had placed him in an impossible position: “Like many of Ezra’s friends, I feel myself torn between anger at his official guilt which is unquestioned and unquestionable – with all its deadly implications, in American lives – and my lifelong affection for the man.”<sup>40</sup>

Over the course of their friendship, spanning sixty years from their first encounter at the University of Pennsylvania through Williams’s death in 1963, Pound and Williams sent each other all manner of missives. Dashed off at a typewriter, visually and orthographically abstruse, Pound’s Williams-directed critiques and cantankerous calls to action are among the hallmarks of his written correspondence. Williams’s letters to Pound, meanwhile, are remarkably live to their recipient’s flair, reciprocal in their fondness for wordplay and debate. But toward the mid-1930s, the primary focus of Pound’s critiques and calls underwent a radical shift, from the health and innovation of American poetry to the state of global economies, from tirades against tedious writers or stubborn publishers to attacks on political leaders. In 1941, responding to a particularly incoherent missive, Williams wrote, “Can’t you see that every word you utter reveals to any intelligent and wellinformed man that you know nothing at all?” His conclusion is exasperated, cutting: “I hope your family is holding up under your weaknesses. You need it – badly.”<sup>41</sup> By Pound’s sentencing, Williams had grown used to meeting Pound’s vitriol with his own, “refus[ing],” as he put it, “to be misunderstood.”<sup>42</sup> Alert to the deplorable conditions at the hospital and to the extremity of his friend’s isolation, Williams wrote

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<sup>39</sup> This actually appears twice, as I’ll later elaborate. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 201.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 241.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 210.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 241.

with some frequency, but not with less ire. The October 30 letter, though responding to one of Pound's milder efforts, is no exception.

Closely typed and stern, the four paragraphs of Williams's first page take up every familiar point of contention: Pound's rashness in making statements against world leaders and economic conditions about which he had no deep-seated expertise, his privileging of political debate over, or in spite of, previously stated poetic ideals, the deleterious effects of his actions on his relationships. The page ends with Williams in full rhetorical gusto, suggesting his friend's convictions have turned so extreme as to embrace their seeming antitheses. Then suddenly, something changes. With the page break comes as well a break in tone, in form. The version of Williams the fresh sheet ushers in is bluntly confessional, raw, no longer reprimanding:

I want to rescue you ( for myself ) because I need you - I being one  
of the few who would be benefitted – but I want you whole, the good  
in you, not a hunk of bacon fried too crisp/<sup>43</sup>

It is a startling shift. The need Williams expresses for Pound's return to an earlier state echoes the need he derides in T. S. Eliot the page before. Eliot, grappling with his own bewilderment over Pound's incarceration, had recently published an essay seeking to reconcile Pound's seemingly disparate creative, critical, and political selves. And Williams, never among Eliot's staunchest admirers, casts the younger poet as a hapless figure, "all but incapacitated" by the situation, a "surprised student into whose study window someone has thrown a brick."<sup>44</sup> But it is Williams, at last, who comes to fit this schema, highlighting his own subject position and seeking to justify Pound's value. Though Williams does not express a feeling of incapacitation, the effect is one of being slowed, almost halted, and this seems to structure his writing on the page. The backlash in lieu of a period is actually more reflective of Pound than of Williams; it is gestural where Williams is typically (in the realm of punctuation, at least) restrained, and seems almost a typo. But Williams corrected his errors with pencil or pen before posting his letters, and the backlash bears no telltale corrective mark. The spacing of the sentence with dashes and parentheses, meanwhile, gives it a deliberative, differentiating openness.

In fact, the whole rest of the page is marked by hesitation and spacing. Having exposed himself, Williams seems to lose his way. He parenthetically narrates his experience of thinking a patient has arrived—" ( I rushed out and found NOBODY in the front office for the moment, which is a blessing – I can go on writing. )"—and then reveals he is being plagued by phone calls: "except for the God Damned telephone in my right ear!"<sup>45</sup> He takes back his remarks about Eliot, abruptly calling the poet's article "really very good" and suggesting, though with little faith, that Pound take its "warnings" to heart. And it is only after all of this, halfway down the page and hanging loosely on its own, that Williams's ventriloquism of Pound appears. Offset by multiple blank lines above and below, the words inhabit a vast and idiosyncratic space:

The great thing you have to say to us, as poets, is :  
READ !                      Read and learn, learn to hear.

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 242.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 241-42.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 243.

“READ!”, positioned staunchly after a deliberate line break, is the only case of emphatic capitalization in the letter as a whole—a stylistic choice that, like the earlier backslash, is less familiar in Williams than in Pound. Williams pushes the colon almost to the page’s edge, as if to force “READ!” to appear by itself, and so the vehemence of this delivery seems special, conclusive. For Williams, perhaps, it was also exhausting. The letter peters out almost immediately after. “No time for more now,” he writes. The rest of his words are chatty, casual.<sup>46</sup> He signs off uncharacteristically, distractedly, with just his initials.<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the letter, Williams’s Poundian “READ!” seems less celebratory than invocatory. He is writing to Pound as Pound writes and has written to him, questing for a sympathetic response through reference to their shared perspectives. It is a plea for hearing as much as it is a commentary on hearing, founded on the belief that they have learned to hear in the same way—and perhaps egged on by the disrupting sounds of Williams’s letter-writing environment. If reading alone can teach hearing, if this is what Pound preaches and also believes, then perhaps the words Williams sends into Pound’s frypan—structured to conjure a voice that is Pound’s own—can reverse the frying process: lower the heat, restore the depth of a more complex, more sensitive humanity. But Williams’s reduction of Pound to a keen and imperative reader-hearer attenuates the force and reality of his frustration with Pound’s uncritical politics and naïve grandstanding. It obscures, that is, the problematic nature of framing those aspects of hearing that appear measurable through poetic exploits as strictly commensurate with either hearing writ large or hearing as a metaphor for communication and apprehension. By focusing on text (on reading) as the primary medium through which hearing may be trained, Williams forecasts the difficulty faced by contemporary critics whose emphases on the “sound structure” of poetry can so easily overlook the extent to which hearing (for those who are hearing) precedes and dynamically exceeds any number of reading or writing acts.

“Perhaps you cannot help yourself,” Williams writes earlier. “In fact I am sure it is the defects of your qualities that annoys us.”<sup>48</sup> As I’ll argue in later pages, however, promoting a narrow idea of Pound’s hearing that, in the process, excluded and decontextualized his embodied experience of sound, constituted a failure to fully perceive his “qualities” in the first place. This impetus, widespread and strongly compounded by Pound’s own tendency to reinforce it, laid the groundwork for disappointment long before Pound’s turn to treason, making all the more acute (and for Williams, unbearable) the feelings of betrayal and disconnection that followed.

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<sup>46</sup> He mentions an upcoming article in the *Briarcliff Quarterly* and commends Pound’s recently published Canto 84, the last of those written in Pisa.

<sup>47</sup> Nearly all of Williams’s letters to friends are signed “Bill” in large, looping cursive. Even after suffering his first stroke, which severely affected the smoothness of his handwriting, he maintained the habit.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Pound/Williams*, 243.

## II. CONSONANCE

Numbers it is. All music when you come to think...  
Musemathematics. And you think you're listening to  
the ethereal.

*Leopold Bloom*  
from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)

What is a “materially verifiable” claim about sound? Sound being material, there are plenty of answers. It can be measured, for instance, as a wave, in terms of frequency and amplitude. It is directional and can be traced to a source. It possesses qualities like pitch (related to frequency), intensity (related to amplitude), duration (related to its existence over time), and timbre (related to the physical attributes of its source). It requires a medium and a space in which to propagate (gas, plasma, liquid, solid, building, courtyard, open field) and can take on different properties (can move more slowly or more quickly, can distort or be halted entirely), depending on these conditions. For a human listener, however, these answers can seem profoundly inadequate. We might call a sound warm or scratchy or soothing or strange. We might find it too loud or too soft or entirely out of place. We might say we like or dislike it. We might give it a name. We might think of whether or not it can be controlled. We might rely on it for information about where we are or what we can access or how we can express ourselves. It might form or construe a part of our identity.

In my opening chapter, I discuss how our tendency to think of sounds as objects both reveals how intensely we can feel our hearing measures certain truths and leads us to impart to our sense of a sound (and so to our sense of how the same sound is heard by others) the many associations, perceptions, and complexities that are the training, stuff, and ephemera of our lives. We can of course, as I acknowledge, predict likelihoods for how a group of hearing individuals working within the same language, or within similar traditions of hearing and sound exposure, will perceive certain sounds and sound combinations. We rely on likelihoods concerning sound—how it is heard, how it is interpreted, how it may be read off a page—every day, so much so that it can feel much cleaner and easier to treat them simply as fact. Moreover, these likelihoods can be intensely self-perpetuating; by repeating individual judgments concerning hearing over time, we can often train those around us to hear more as we do, to value similar sounds and sound combinations, and to attribute to those sounds similar descriptions. If we forget that we are treating likelihood as fact (or if we never knew this about ourselves to begin with), the sensation of training and of being trained would seem to reinforce a conclusion of objectivity. But because sound is material, there is a distinction to be made between its existence as pressure measurable as vibration and its contextualized perception by a human ear. What is objective about a sound may not register for an individual, and what is perceived by an individual to be true about a sound, however deeply felt, may not be objective. Time and again, the simplicity of this maxim, which reflects so much else about human perceptual experience, belies how challenging it can be to accept and internalize—particularly when the ways we have learned to communicate about sound, when the literal words we use to describe it, do not always cue us to perceive or relate its complexities.

In this chapter, I want to look in particular at how beliefs about sound are formed in and by language and how our comfort with certain descriptive words in particular can limit not only the degree to which we imagine or leave room for other experiences of hearing but also the degree to which our own hearing experiences can be communicated. These concerns are not specific to poetry or to poetry criticism, but they have a significant bearing on each, as I'd like to emphasize by first revisiting K. Silem Mohammad's conviction that "a string of sounds can be objectively measured for euphony or cacophony."

Mohammad is so confident in his stance concerning objective measurement along these lines that he includes it only as part of a larger complaint about the difficulty of teaching creative writing students, some of whom, he notes, can be not only resistant to the idea but "recalcitrant."<sup>49</sup> He doesn't provide an example in the moment of a string of sounds or of his students' objections, but he does offer a reading of the first four lines of Jorie Graham's "Evolution":

My nakedness is very slow.  
I call to it, I waste my sympathy.  
Comparison, too, is very slow.  
Where is the past?

These four lines, according to Mohammad, display "concrete indications of linguistic skill."<sup>50</sup> He further observes that the "vocalic interplay of A's and O's, along with the consonantal slide of S's and N's, is highly controlled and euphonious" and that the "latticework supporting this musical alternation is that old standby, the iamb." The first line, he tells us, is "perfect iambic tetrameter, the second pentameter," and the rest "largely structured around loosened and syncopated variations." There are so many ways of hearing implied by just this one moment of reading. We may guess, to start, that the "vocalic interplay" drawing Mohammad's attention comprises the fact that A's and O's are both abundant and interlaced throughout, varied in their appearance and likely pronunciation. There is a short A followed by a long O, a long A followed by a short O; there is the O of "to," which is not quite either of the O's of "comparison" or the O of "slow." As for the "consonantal slide of S's and N's," we might guess that he is focusing on the two syllables in these four lines that begin with one consonant and end with the other: the "ness" of "nakedness," the "son" of "comparison." But his further assertions that these intuited sounds and sound relations can be broadly termed "euphonious" (pleasing and harmonious to the ear) moves him further along the scale from objectivity to subjectivity than his phrasing would suggest.

What constitutes a euphonious sound? For those of us who are hearing, many sounds tend to strike us as sensorily "consonant" (pleasant, as opposed to unpleasant, in our immediate perception, without any further context), but efforts to study this aspect of perception suggest that the experience of sensory consonance may as much be a consequence of training and familiarity as of spontaneous physiological response and that it is doubtful we will ever be able definitively to predict or explain any single instance of it for an individual.<sup>51</sup> The sounds we are most likely collectively to judge consonant, for instance, are largely periodic—that is to say, their component frequencies

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<sup>49</sup> Mohammad, "The Poet's Ear" (Part IV).

<sup>50</sup> Mohammad, "The Poet's Ear" (Part I).

<sup>51</sup> Claude V. Palisca and Brian C.J. Moore, "Consonance," *Grove Music Online*.

repeat at fairly regular, interlocking intervals<sup>52</sup>—but this broadly describes human voices in speech, which are especially essential and formative. When hearing two or more periodic sounds in relation, meanwhile, we are likely to judge them consonant if they are related by simple ratios, as in much Western classical music. Few cultures remain that are not influenced by Western music. Moreover consonance is not simply an either/or experience. We experience it in gradients and our experiences can evolve over time. We may recognize a sound as sensorily consonant but not find it intensively or interestingly pleasurable. A sound that may begin as consonant to our hearing, in another context may seem less so. Any aspect or combination of aspects of a sound's material existence may be the reason for our experience of consonance, and this may be the result of any number of additional associations tied to our past or current experiences. Though an experience of consonance may be quite discrete, with an impact mappable to equally discrete converging factors, the word “consonant” alone (or any of its many synonyms) conveys none of these details.

Complicating matters still further is the fact that training in music (even on the most casual order of listening to music and speaking about it with others) can greatly influence not only what we physically hear as consonant but also how we go on to discuss and describe our experiences of consonance in language. Music—specifically, the forms of Western classical music that are by some measures ubiquitous—may encourage us to differentiate, in our discourse, between an experience of consonance that is broadly, formally recognized and one that seems more idiosyncratic. But because music also tends to engender many of the experiences of sound we instinctively feel to be consonant, it is often through the vocabulary of music and through the word “music” itself that we seek to express consonance of every kind.

We have seen this in Mohammad already. In poetic analysis, one often comes across a sequence of syllables that one assumes, once imagined or vocalized by a reader, will share similar pronunciation and seem related either through deliberate patterning or through the suggestion of a pattern. But by referring to the “interplay” he senses between Graham's A's and O's first as euphonious and then as a “musical alternation,” Mohammad implies in his reading an additional experience of sound that he does not go on (and may not actually be prepared) to discuss. As many ways of hearing as his reading suggests, how he actually hears Graham's poem, either internally or out loud, is in large part concealed. Recalling the material properties of sound, we might ask any of the following and expect an answer: How does Mohammad experience the pitch contours and pascings of Graham's vocalic moments? What durations does he give the consonantal slides? Whose or what voice does he imagine speaking this poem? In what space does he imagine this voice contained and what are its qualities? When he recognizes an iamb, is it because of how he hears and pronounces it in the natural flow of his reading? Or because, as students of poetry are so often directed to do, he has counted out the syllables and tested each pair for contrast individually? (His ability to tell us the precise iambic breakdown of each line suggests he has spent at least some time at the latter activity.) What changes each time he reads the poem and what seems to stay the same? Each of these details, among so many potential others, may play a role in Mohammad's sense of Graham's lines as euphonious, but as long as euphony is his term of choice, they may never be revealed. Even if we were to have, as part of his analysis, a recording of him reading Graham's poem out loud, this would not (recalling the performance fallacy) capture the internal relations or modes of hearing that, for him, could be most influential. Where an experience of consonance is conveyed

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<sup>52</sup> Due to their complexity, natural sounds can never be perfectly periodic, but many function in close enough approximation of periodicity that we tend to refer to them as periodic outright.

just in passing, where it does not feel integral to a reader's sense of a poem, these distinctions are perhaps less important. But it is often precisely experiences of consonance—however varying in intensity and degree—that critics come to construe (to recall Izenberg and Perloff) the “seductions and enchantments that draw readers and that move poetry beyond mere instrumentality.”

What does writing differently about sound with respect to poetry require? In part, I'd like to suggest, it requires an alternate lexicon—ways of framing and thinking about sound that keep us connected to its properties and potentials. This does not mean abandoning poetry's most distinctive and distinguishing vocabularies (our discussions of meter and feet, or our debates over line breaks and rhyme). But it does mean connecting these forms of observation and analysis to a far more grounded conception of human hearing—one that accounts for and helps us register a greater plurality of our experiences of sound.

### (Re)Building a Lexicon

In 1995, Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, two urban planners with additional backgrounds in philosophy, sociology, musicology, and music performance, channeled a pair of Canadian grants into a concise summation of current research concerning the movement, interpretation, and experience of sound in contemporary urban environments. Originally released in French, then re-released in English a decade later as *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, their book aims not only to address but also to meet the need for a functional, multidisciplinary lexicon to account for the breadth of human sound perception. Beginning with a few key observations about the official and unofficial state of sound studies (much of which remains true today), it goes on to offer a set of propositions for how we might transform our discussions of sound and hearing. Sound classification, Augoyard and Torgue note, has a long history in Western culture and schools of thought, but it is a history marked primarily by assessments of purity, musicality, and intelligibility. Though daily life involves and is structured by constant contact with all manner of sounds, we've tended to focus our critical and conversational attention solely on extremes of personal hearing experience (whether we find something especially pleasing or distressing, euphonious or cacophonous, consonant or dissonant), leaving us with an emaciated vocabulary always already embedded with judgment and constrained, though often not consciously, by cultural conditions and stereotypes.

Even concertedly interdisciplinary attempts to account for the broader operation and impact of sounds in our environment—such as by composer and critic R. Murray Schafer, through the term “soundscape”—have been recurrently motivated and shaped by preexisting stances on what sounds should or should not be present, which sounds are and are not ultimately useful or natural. “This eagerness to approach sound like any other object and to use a key word, which in fact masks a deficiency in our knowledge about sound,” write Augoyard and Torgue, “is largely responsible for the loss of focus and unlikely relevance of a term endowed with a particular and precise meaning.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 9. They do not use the word “object” naively; their work pays respects to Pierre Schaeffer's disruptions of academic sound-music-noise classifications, noting that the concept of “objets sonores” aided our understanding of perceptive intentionality with respect to sound and transformed debates concerning sonic “essence.” However, they also note that narrowly examining encounters with individual sonic objects does not ultimately support the description of how sounds act on us as we most frequently experience them—not as the sole focus of our attention in sterile, highly controlled listening environments, but as myriad points

Instead, they argue, we need vocabulary that helps us account as much for “acoustical sources” as for “inhabited space” and for “the linked pair of sound perception and sound action.”<sup>54</sup> We need definitions that remind us of the “interaction between the physical sound environment, the sound milieu of a socio-cultural community, and the ‘internal soundscape’ of every individual,” and that ultimately make such interactions articulable.

Their most significant bid, following on these assertions, is to ask that we think less in terms of sounds than in terms of “sonic effects.” Doing so frames sound automatically in relation to how it is experienced, yoking individual claims of sound perception to the physical characteristics of each moment of perception and, importantly, to the forms of research and knowledge that can elucidate their impact. “As soon as [sound] is perceived contextually,” they observe, it is

inseparable from an effect, as subtle as it can be, a particular colouration due to collective attitudes and representations or to individual traits. In this way, there exists, between the sound and the sonic effect, not a relation of similarity but rather a set of mutual references between the sound, physically measurable although always abstract, and its interpretation, the particular fashioning by which it enters into perceptive development.<sup>55</sup>

Crucial to this description is its final clause, which positions interpretation not as the endpoint of perception but as the beginning point for “perceptive development.” Sonic effects, as defined by Augoyard and Torgue, encapsulate our most immediate experience of sound—prior to our abstract or comparative associations—and acknowledge this experience as itself interpretive. Unlike in poetic analysis, where “effect” so often describes the set of impressions a reader imagines a particular word-perceived-as-sound (itself an imaginative, though often involuntary, act<sup>56</sup>) to convey, “effect” here is limited to experiences of sound that are “not reducible either objectively *or* subjectively” (emphasis mine).<sup>57</sup> Among the effects listed and defined in Augoyard and Torgue’s volume are in fact the distinct effects of willfully imagining a sound, which they term “phonemnesis,” and of being involuntarily provoked (“by a particular signal or sonic context”) to recall one: “anamnesis.”<sup>58</sup> Together, these terms refer to the way in which present cues, either passively experienced or deliberately enacted, can trigger all manner of sound-related recollection (a range that includes very specific and narrow sonic experiences, abstract or personal associations, and powerful, even overwhelming, emotional content), and it is at the intersection of these two effects, which at times work in tandem, that I would locate the experience of reading as a mode of hearing. These effects are not reducible objectively because it is impossible to predict or corral individual relationships between cue and recollection, and they are not reducible subjectively because their occurrence is a fact within human experience, connected to context-specific physical characteristics.

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of overlapping and simultaneous stimuli made possible by our physical movement through spaces and in relation to materials over time.

<sup>54</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> I mean to differentiate here between reading a word that implies a sound (the word “chirping,” for instance) and the impression that words are themselves sounds, which can feel instantaneous even to “silent” readers on account of how integrated reading and hearing is for those with a hearing relationship to language.

<sup>57</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 21 (“anamnesis”) and 85 (“phonemnesis”).

To think about sound and hearing in terms of sonic effects is to keep conditions of access and experience well in mind. It is to distinguish, as do Augoyard and Torgue, among and between effects that describe the basic propagation of sound and are therefore fully quantifiable via the fields of physical and applied acoustics (“resonance,” “distortion,” and “reverberation” fall under this category); effects that depend for their strength and particularity on the perceptive and mnemonic organization of individuals (as in “phonemnesis” and “anamnesis”); effects that concern the spatiotemporal flow of a sound’s propagation (for instance, speeding up and slowing down, which Augoyard and Torgue refer to respectively by their Western classical music designations “*accelerando*” and “*rallentando*”); effects that link perception and motor function in a listener (including “attraction,” which describes a listener’s involuntary fixation by an emerging sound phenomenon, and “repulsion,” which describes a listener’s uncontrollable or unconscious rejection of a sound either mentally or physically); and finally, effects that gain potency in accordance with a listener’s experience of shifting contexts for meaning (what Augoyard and Torgue refer to as “semantic” effects, and which include experiences of “quotation” and “repetition”). It is to locate in oft-used, quasi-metaphorical terms like “resonance” the literal experience or reality of vibration they may describe, and it is to recognize diffuse, reflexive invocations of such terms as potentially masking a diversity of other sonic encounters.

In all these ways, Augoyard and Torgue’s *Guide* serves as a compelling road map for how to improve the labor and effectiveness of communication about hearing. Throughout, its affirmation of individual experience coexists with its appreciation of pertinent contexts and curiosity about variability, all of which go beyond mere lip service. As an offering of language and an aid to comprehension, it is thoughtful but necessarily and judiciously limited, neither an “encyclopedia,” to quote its authors, nor a “dictionary.” It is, rather, a very focused “repertoire,” one that “records sonic effects that are sufficiently known to be clearly described and identified on site or during listening” and, in doing so, establishes a paradigm according to which additional effects can be added.<sup>59</sup> By drawing its terms and definitions from a broad range of languages and disciplines and situating its accounting of effects within a recognition of everyday urban environments (taking into consideration for example experiences of public transportation, interaction with modern architecture, the use and development of electroacoustic technology, and participation among crowds), it works to decompartmentalize our ways of describing sounds and sonic experience. The future it posits—in which scholars of all stripes work in tandem to reinforce and expand a single shared vocabulary and integrated methodology—is also a future in which conversations about “the sound of poetry” or “sound in poetry” can become conversations about the sonic effects of which poetry may make us aware, and about the specific qualities of sound and hearing we may notice shaping our individual and collective experiences of language.

But Augoyard and Torgue are not literary critics, and this is important to note. Though literature (“textual expressions”) is counted among the *Guide*’s “domains of reference”—a list that also includes physical and applied acoustics, architecture and urbanism, psychology and physiology of perception, sociology and everyday culture, musical and electroacoustic aesthetics, and media expressions—it is conceived of not as a field whose scholars may be enriched by “transversal” readings about sound (“transversal” being the word Augoyard and Torgue use to describe the kind of cross-disciplinary perusal of definitions they both facilitate and encourage) but as a simple clearinghouse of records proving the existence, variety, and consequences of sonic effects. As part of

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<sup>59</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 14.

their definition of “ubiquity,” for example—an effect that “expresses the difficulty or impossibility of locating a sound source”—Augoyard and Torgue refer readers to a poem by twentieth-century French poet Henri Michaux, throughout which sound is indeed described as delocalized and omnidirectional. The excerpt they provide from Michaux’s poem “Dans l’eau changeante des résonances” (“In Changing Water, Resonances”) reads as follows:

|                                                                                        |                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Allongées                                                                              | <i>Elongated</i>                             |
| dilatées                                                                               | <i>dilated</i>                               |
| triumphantes vibrations                                                                | <i>triumphant vibrations</i>                 |
| Des sons                                                                               | <i>Sounds</i>                                |
| des nids de sons                                                                       | <i>nests of sounds</i>                       |
| des sons                                                                               | <i>sounds</i>                                |
| où tout s’engloutit                                                                    | <i>in which all is engulfed</i>              |
| des coulées de sons                                                                    | <i>currents of sounds</i>                    |
| des couloirs de sons                                                                   | <i>corridors of sounds</i>                   |
| des sons qui refluent de partout                                                       | <i>sounds that flow back from everywhere</i> |
| l’espace en espaces se déplace. <i>space is within spaces displaced.</i> <sup>60</sup> |                                              |

Not only does this excerpt offer a description of ubiquity, Augoyard and Torgue suggest, but it also supports the notion that ubiquity may, for some, be enjoyable. This last is of particular importance from their perspective because negative feelings are often the hallmarks of ubiquity for most listeners (it can be inordinately distressing to find oneself unable to pinpoint the origin of a sound). Michaux’s poem, which contains no indication of anxious emotion, fear, or discomfort (the vibrations are even described as “triumphant”), is both a description and a data point, a piece of evidence that broadens our sense of the effect’s potential impact. It is also, however, a *poem*, a defining detail that Augoyard and Torgue seem to ascribe additional, if only vaguely specified, value. Writing briefly on their decision to share excerpts from a range of literary works alongside findings from contemporary scientific and sociological studies, they remark that they especially wished to include Michaux’s poem because it is “particularly eloquent and will likely help readers to perceive the phenomenon through poetic means.”<sup>61</sup> As to what either “eloquence” or “poetic means” describes in this context, we are left to guess, but their confidence that each is a function of Michaux’s text and likely to be impactful is notably high. Could it be that Augoyard and Torgue, elsewhere so meticulous about interpretation and perception, hold their own unvoiced (perhaps wholly uninterrogated) expectations concerning poetry and sound? Could it be that they presume the average (French-speaking, French-hearing) reader can be counted on to find, in Michaux’s varying repetitions of certain vowels and consonants, in his perpetual delay of orienting verbs, in his spontaneous transitioning between words with overlapping pronunciations (“sons” and “s’engloutit,” “coulées” and “couloirs,” “espaces” and “déplace”), or in some other feature entirely, not merely a

<sup>60</sup> English translation is my own.

<sup>61</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, 18.

*description* of ubiquity, but also an especially compelling *enactment* of it? These would be my guesses, but I cannot say for sure.

To my mind, the largest stated caveat of Augoyard and Torgue's *Guide* is that they believe the meaning and clarity of their work—and therefore its ability to thrive and be used as a tool—depends on whether or not each effect is “adequately performed and interpreted by both actors and listeners.” This caveat, though presented as an obvious statement of fact, is extraordinarily heavy. What, after all, constitutes “adequacy” either in performance or in interpretation? Is it possible to measure for adequacy without a starting complement of representative environments, instructors, and trainings of one's own? Can one simply imagine a sound well enough to read and converse about its effects? The implication here is that one *can't*—that one must frequent sound-rich environments and sound-making communities that afford one a chance to reflect intensively on one's own sonic experiences. In a book also replete with diagrams, situation maps, and architectural sketches inviting readers to visualize how sound forms and travels, the recurring stipulation is that there can be no substitute for *the guided practice of hearing*. It is not enough to be or to identify as a “hearing” individual; one must also attend to one's experience of sound with the intention of becoming more adept at articulating it, and one must deliberately seek to learn about and recognize each effect as experientially true. For Augoyard and Torgue, who hope to spur a “rehabilitation of general auditory sensitivity”<sup>62</sup> (“rehabilitation” in this case comprising, for born-hearing individuals, a conscious return to a precategorical state of audition that then allows for more intentional choices with language), a reading practice is not, in itself, a hearing practice, and a hearing practice begins not with a text, but with an awareness of one's hearing body, susceptible as it is to the propagation of sounds in space.

At the same time, their optimism in sharing examples from literature and the influence they attribute to these examples emphasize the vast role they perceive literary reading to play in the shaping of our interest in sound, as well as of the depth and detail of our attention to hearing. Literature even emerges as the final justification for why their project can afford to be limited:

A map plotting the potential field covered by all the various sonic effects described would present us with a very irregular distribution. On the one hand, some effects are well defined by acoustics, but fail to account for numerous other phenomena found in our environment. On the other hand, within certain particular contexts there exists an infinity of different sound events the multidisciplinary description of which, even if limited to the most repetitive phenomena, would take years and would engage a considerable network of observers. Therefore, while we were unsatisfied with an acoustic universality that was too reductive, we also tried to avoid presenting the reader with a chronicle of sonic singularities—a task we leave to the talent of novelists, who often possess an astonishing sensitivity to sound ecology.<sup>63</sup>

As flattering to novelists as this conclusion may be, a guide is not a novel and a novel not a guide. Whatever sensitivities a novelist might possess to the production and reception of sound, whatever skills they might have on hand to render their sensitivities in writing, it is not in fact a condition of

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<sup>62</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 14-15.

novel writing to name or explain (or to assist readers in naming or understanding) either the fundamental sonic effects or the instances of sonic singularity a novel may happen to chronicle.

Augoyard and Torgue's *Library of Babel* stance when it comes to literature (i.e. choose any novel, and it is likely to improve one's knowledge of human sound perception) reflects the degree to which their own "astonishing sensitivity" gives them purchase within language and allows them to derive constructive information about sonic experience from an abundance of disparate literary passages. But for many (and I would wager most) other readers, this process is reversed. Literature, over and above acoustics textbooks and multidisciplinary guides, is a primary source for our language about sound, and it is, as such, wholly uncurated. Not only does literature reflect and reinforce much of the language we already use to describe how (and what) we hear, but we rarely approach it with the means to understand how individual works proliferate the hearing assumptions and biases of their readers and authors. As Augoyard and Torgue demonstrate in part through the influence they imagine for Michaux, the more we identify with an author's perspective on hearing and presume ourselves to share their experience of sonic events, the less we may investigate our feeling that a particular description of a sound will suffice.

What does adopting a new lexicon for our communications about sound require? For poets steeped in literature and literary critics steeped in poems, it can be exceptionally difficult to think or operate outside of the description provided by a text, particularly when the terms are familiar and so often seem at once to enable and to demand discourse. Even with a hearing practice that allows us to begin to recognize sonic effects and their implications in our daily lives, even with a desire to revise our various approaches to conveying our own hearing through language, we need also to be able to identify and interrogate the texts we encounter as much for what they reveal as for what they obscure on the order of idiosyncratic, qualitative, and quantifiable experiences of sound. Short of developing a reverse lexicon—an encyclopedia of literary passages and poems, say, that patiently connects the terms and descriptions each employs to the sonic effects and perceptual functions each implies—we need a reading practice that hones our attention to how language implying sound may appear and be used.

In the two sections that follow, I want to examine how even literary passages seemingly devoted to an exploration of sound perception can benefit from a mode of critical reading that does not take their dominant vocabularies or authors' framings for granted. The two passages from modernist literature I've chosen describe moments not just of hearing and listening but also of hearing and listening to music—an experience of sound that (as I've already begun to discuss) can be especially difficult to convey with nuance. Each passage has been a magnet for critical attention virtually from the moment of its publication, and together they may provide us with fertile ground for reflection. Many of their approaches to describing and contending with sonic experience mirror the approaches of the poets in my remaining chapters, as well as those still dominant in literary criticism today.

### **Sublime Noises and Conditions of "Music"**

One of the more memorable scenes of listening in English literature may be found in E.M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howards End*. It occurs early in the plot, beginning and largely comprising the novel's fifth chapter, and it is remarked on as much for the brash opening claims of its opinionated

narrator—third person omniscient, chummily conversational—as for its efforts to represent each character’s sense of relation to the sounds being heard:

It will be generally admitted that Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it. Whether you are like Mrs Munt, and tap surreptitiously when the tunes come—of course, not so as to disturb the others; or like Helen, who can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music’s flood; or like Margaret, who can only see the music; or like Tibby, who is profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee; or like their cousin, Fraülein Mosebach, who remembers all the time that Beethoven is ‘echt Deutsch’; or like Fraülein Mosebach’s young man, who can remember nothing but Fraülein Mosebach: in any case, the passion of your life becomes more vivid, and you are bound to admit that such a noise is cheap at two shillings. It is cheap, even if you hear it in the Queen’s Hall, dreariest music-room in London, though not as dreary as the Free Trade Hall, Manchester; and even if you sit on the extreme left of that hall, so that the brass bumps at you before the rest of the orchestra arrives, it is still cheap.<sup>64</sup>

The sounds, in this case, comprise a symphony—and not just any symphony, but one of the most recognizable works of Western classical repertoire, a hundred years after its premiere. What the chapter reveals about their reception, therefore, becomes a reflecting pool for the many questions of culture, class, art, and education with which the novel as a whole is concerned. Though the narrator declares that the broad consequence of all this listening is, for all these listeners, a feeling of satisfaction—and though she<sup>65</sup> further suggests a shared attitude concerning ticket pricing and a shared recognition of each music hall’s character and faults—she does not also allow us to assume that the experience of each audience member is entirely the same. For Fraülein Mosebach, it is an exercise in connection with a beloved national identity, and for her “young man,” it is a way of drawing closer to a beloved individual. For Mrs. Munt, it is a physically interactive event, a chance to affirm and express her familiarity with a popular work of art, and for Tibby, it is an opportunity to showcase and further his scholarly knowledge through direct contact with an object of study. For Tibby’s sisters—Helen and Margaret, the novel’s main protagonists—it is a crucial source of differentiation; for Helen, it is an incitement to visual imagination, and for Margaret, a strictly aural encounter. And as if this weren’t distinction enough, additional accounts of discrepancy continue to surface throughout the chapter, such that even the narrator’s own initial assertions begin to collapse.

Having declared the symphony a singular and exceptional “sublime noise,” for instance, the narrator then cannot help but share some of the ways in which its component “noises” ultimately vary in penetrative capacity and make themselves differently known. The first paragraph alone exposes the variability of sound propagation, as differences in seating within a single hall result in different proximities to the instruments on stage and different experiences of the sounds they produce. Orchestras not being at all symmetrical with respect to instrumentation, and halls not

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<sup>64</sup> E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, 26-27.

<sup>65</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 207-8. The narrator’s gender is only revealed for the first time much later, via this sentence: “When men like us, it is for our better qualities, and however tender their liking, we dare not be unworthy of it, or they will quietly let us go.”

being at all capable of carrying sounds identically to every seat, sitting to the “extreme left” in this case means hearing brass instruments first, over and above the rest. Then, too, there are the formal breaks separating the symphony into four parts (or “movements”), two of which are full stops allowing for conversation between patrons, shouts, and applause. And though the characters do express their delight, they also express their distraction. Helen, whose feelings of connection to the Beethoven perhaps best reflect the narrator’s opening pronouncement—she is, after the first movement, so “enwrapped” by the music that she cannot entertain her aunt’s desire for gossip, and her symphony-induced flights of fancy often define the chapter—nevertheless finds herself largely uncompeled by the second movement (the “Andante”).<sup>66</sup> Where the first movement suggests to her a flood replete with heroes and shipwrecks, the third suggests goblins and a “trio of elephants dancing,” and the fourth conjures Beethoven himself, gods and demigods, “the magnificence of life and death” amid “vast roarings of superhuman joy.”<sup>67</sup> The second movement only sounds like “all the other beautiful Andantes that Beethoven has written,” causing her attention to wander and emphasizing the recursive nature of symphonic composition and form.<sup>68</sup> Tibby, meanwhile, supported by his score, reveals himself to be awaiting a single moment (and single instrument) in particular—the “transitional passage on the drum” connecting movements three and four—which Mrs. Munt, despite Tibby’s direction, later reveals herself not to have heard.<sup>69</sup>

Further chipping away at the notion of a uniformly satisfying Beethoven experience are the constant indications of music hall etiquette and concertgoing expectations to which Forster’s characters are bound. As Helen in particular quests for reflections of her own hearing in the reactions and responses of her neighbors, we’re given glimpses of Frieda (Fraülein Mosebach), who, “listening to Classical Music” will not acknowledge Helen’s smile, and Herr Liesecke (Fraülein Mosebach’s young man), who looks “as if wild horses could not make him inattentive,” but whose actual level of attentiveness and experience are unknown.<sup>70</sup> Characters whisper and hush one another when inclined to speak after the music has already started, and we are also reminded of Mrs. Munt’s discreet tapping, which becomes Helen’s observation of Mrs. Munt’s desire to tap, and which Helen deems “so British.” And finally we’re introduced Leonard Bast (unnamed in the chapter), a young clerk who lives on the edge of poverty, and for whom, as it turns out, the ticket could never have been conceived of as “cheap” to begin with. “Earlier in the afternoon,” we’re told, “he had worried about seats. Ought he to have paid as much as two shillings? Earlier still he had wondered, ‘Shall I try to do without a programme?’”<sup>71</sup> The program, in this case, would have included notes about the pieces to be performed—currency for conversation—and would have needed to be purchased for an additional fee. Leonard’s eventual assessment of the concert as “fine” effaces the undercurrent of financial distress he perpetually associates with concertgoing. Margaret’s return assessment, that “the Beethoven’s fine,” gives the symphony pride of place among the other works on the program (pieces by Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Elgar, each of which she holds in negative opinion), but hardly amounts to a transcendent endorsement.

As first the symphony and then the concert come to an end, debates, internal and external, break out over the comparative qualities of German and English music, the differences between

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<sup>66</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 28-29.

<sup>68</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 28.

<sup>70</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 34.

music and visual art, the role of music within each listener's life, and the validity of their respective reactions and interpretations. Forster has laid the groundwork, or so it seems, for readers to find themselves among the profiles of the audience at Queen's Hall and to weigh their boldest instincts and claims about what seems universal or shared in music—in Beethoven's symphony perhaps most especially—against the reality of “all sorts and conditions” whose lives may include but not be transformed by it, or whose “diverse influences” (to quote from Helen's thoughts in passing) may produce equally diverse loci of meaning.<sup>72</sup> In the larger context of the chapter, and then of the novel, “sublime noise” becomes a provocation to ponder whether or not a shared experience of sublimity through music is possible at a time when “music” as a category is being differently encountered and radically redefined (significantly, to the point of incorporating sounds once widely construed as “noise”), and when nineteenth century aesthetics, though still in abundance, seem an inadequate frame for twentieth-century living. It is a rich line of inquiry made all the richer by the strong presence of commentary on music in Forster's other writings, and it has unsurprisingly, therefore, galvanized a lion's share of literary critical responses.<sup>73</sup>

But to read Forster's chapter as it seems to want to be read—as a persistent querying of the perception, function, and meaning of music at the start of the twentieth century—is not quite the same as confronting what it implies about (as Augoyard and Torgue would put it) “sound ecology.” As variegated as “music” appears to be in the chapter's central scenes, each mention of it necessarily stands in for countless more potential and actual sonic events and moments of perception (both in the immediate flow of experience at Queen's Hall and in the prior course of each character's life) than the word, even with its added contexts, can convey. We do not, in hearing music, hear *music*—at least not as a discrete object or sound in itself. We more accurately hear sonic textures, collections of distinct sounds for which we have developed certain succinct habits of verbal description, and we judge the presence or absence of music according to our trained perception of how these sounds function in relation to one another and how we imagine them from description. The rapidity with which we individually may perceive a sound or sound sequence to be musical often leads us to conceive of music as an autonomous, readily identifiable whole, but global studies of human hearing and music culture have consistently shown there to be no universal condition governing what may register as music to a given listener.

Though Tibby is the only one holding a Beethoven score, it is worth our remembering that the many sounds comprising Beethoven's symphony are not merely familiar to each of Forster's characters in the sense that all have heard this symphony before; the sounds are familiar also in the sense that each character is firmly acquainted with all the instruments of a standard orchestra, their capacities for pitch, loudness, and duration, the many combinations by which they perform together and apart, and even the specific ratios of the harmonies they produce, the patterns of their sounds moving in time from one pitch to another, from one statement to the next. “Repetition is so much rooted in our perceptive life,” write Augoyard and Torgue, “that it also weaves into our expressive dimension; we could almost define music as the art of organizing repetitions.”<sup>74</sup> Forster's characters are equipped to recognize the many layers of repetitions inherent in Beethoven's Fifth, to process

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<sup>72</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> See Josh Epstein, *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer* (Baltimore Johns Hopkins Press, 2014); Barry R. Westburg, “Forster's Fifth Symphony: Another Aspect of *Howards End*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 10 no.4 (Winter 1964–1965): 359–65; Michelle Fillion, *Difficult Rhythm: Music and the Word in E.M. Forster* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 94.

them fluidly: as music, as Beethoven, as symphonic, as classical. The sounds at their source are so familiar in fact as to seem to each character, at many points, indiscrete: to be heard and then immediately forgotten, to be internally displaced or diminished by other preoccupations, or to be registered only dimly, by way of the lingering cloud of meanings and associations to which they have been connected over time. It is this shared basic experience of consonance that, once acknowledged, becomes broadly describable first as music and then as Beethoven. But, and crucially, it is also this shared basic experience of consonance, which implies but does not specify additional degrees of familiarity and interest for each listener, that makes it so difficult to discuss the more discrete moments of sound perception that may set one character's hearing apart from another's and contour each character's use of the word "music" (or "Beethoven") on the whole.

To describe any single moment of music, however impactful, in something approaching faithfulness to its sound content requires time, precise recollection (or access to means for recollection), and highly specialized language. It becomes almost an exercise in self-compassion for Forster's characters to assume, or perhaps to hope, they can be understood with whatever language they choose, given that everyone present has at least *heard* (or so it seems) the same thing. Even "well-versed in counterpoint" Tibby, indicating the transitional passage he so favors, only mentions the presence of a drum, when in actuality this drum—a C timpani beaten steadily—is accompanied by held tones in the violas and second violins, doubled by short strokes in the celli and basses, and overlaid by a repeated three-note figure in the first violins that gradually shifts from minor to major, rises up the scale, and increases in volume. The drum may be considered remarkable here in part because it so rarely plays just with the strings and because it holds absolutely steady, not missing a beat or changing in tone, until the entire character of piece has shifted (it is a drone). But if one does not pay attention to how often drums play alone with strings, or if one is drawn not to the sound of the drum but to the much higher in pitch, likely closer in proximity (to a live audience), and more noticeably melodic violin line, this passage may not strike one as a "drum" passage at all.

We get a glimpse of how communication over musical listening breaks down when Mrs. Munt exasperates Tibby by insisting that she only remembers his favorite passage "in a way" because "every instrument is so beautiful it is difficult to pick out one thing rather than another."<sup>75</sup> We've already been told that Mrs. Munt recognizes and enthusiastically responds to the "tunes," so it can't be true that her experience of the symphony is undifferentiated. But when pressed to account for a single moment in particular—a combination of sounds to which she had attached no special significance and to which she was unable to devote a more informed or familiar attention—she defaults to claiming that the whole symphony (by way of its equally "beautiful" instruments) sounds more or less the same. Then, just a short while later, she insists, "I am by no means pleased by everything. There was a thing—something about a faun in French—which Helen went into ecstasies over, but I thought it most tinkling and superficial."<sup>76</sup> It is of course impossible for us to know what exactly soured her on her Debussy encounter (his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is the French piece referenced here), but this second remark, comprising Mrs. Munt's attempt to convey more of the nuances of her hearing, is likely a reference to more specific sonic events within Debussy's piece than her broadly dismissive description makes it seem. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd note that the complement of orchestral instruments used by Beethoven and Debussy in the Fifth and in the *Prélude* respectively are not identical; Debussy makes extensive use of a harp, strummed from end to

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<sup>75</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 33.

end and plucked in its highest register, as well as a set of small, pitched, antique cymbals (*crotales*) that, when struck, can sound like shimmering bells. Neither instrument appears anywhere in Beethoven's work<sup>77</sup>—the sounds of the Fifth are weighted more toward the lower and deeper end of the orchestral range on the whole—and it seems not beyond reason to suggest that either one, or the two in combination, could easily be described as “tinkling.”

I don't necessarily think it's useful, from a literary critical standpoint, to speculate endlessly over which moments within a piece of music may drive a character's overall impressions of it, but I do think perpetually recognizing that distinct moments within music exist—and that each is made up of materially sonic events generative of discrete sonic effects—can help us read descriptions of musical listening less as indications of how individuals hear *music* than as examples of how language is martialled (for better and worse) to suggest simply what individuals *hear*. Following the end of the concert, for instance, Margaret launches into a diatribe throughout which she assumes her sister deliberately chooses to hear all music as referential. “Now this very symphony we've just been having,” Margaret opines, “—she won't let it alone. She labels it with meanings from start to finish; turns it into literature. I wonder if the day will ever return when music will be treated as music.”<sup>78</sup> This oppositional distinction Margaret makes between music “treated as music” and music “turn[ed] into literature”—with the former presented as the original (and preferred) status quo—is the locus for the most prevalent critical debates surrounding this passage. Critical effort has focused especially on locating Forster among his characters in an effort to frame the novel's stance on how music should be heard and whether literature can itself be music of a kind. For David Deutsch, *Howards End* comes to mark the “creation of the modern symphonic novel.”<sup>79</sup> For Josh Epstein, it supports an opposite conclusion—that, in a reversal of Walter Pater's claim that “all art aspires to a condition of music,” modernist art in fact “aspires to noise.”<sup>80</sup> From what the narrator imparts to us of Helen's experience, however, we know Helen's imaginings come upon her involuntarily, without premeditation or forethought. Rather than listening to the symphony and attempting to freight each moment with narrative, she is often in the grips of the anamnesis effect. Certain moments evoke for her a goblin or an elephant. Phrases spring to mind, as do emotions. But these evocations are not random; they are localized in specific sound events and are internally consistent, so much so that Helen refers aloud to each event directly in terms of the creature or action it evokes.

What an emphasis on music absent a more granular emphasis on hearing can so easily elide is what Forster's characters miss about one another: that music, like all sound, may be interpreted actively, but it is first (to recall Augoyard and Torgue) interpreted reflexively; that however much training or familiarity one may have within a particular system for listening, there are elements of how one hears that are entirely out of one's control, as well as elements of how one hears that exceed one's ability (and at times willingness) to communicate. Forster, it is acknowledged, was more like Helen than like Margaret, though there are strong indications he wished his tendencies were reversed. Writing of his own hearing in 1939, Forster notes that he struggles to pay attention during concerts and that even when he does find himself engaged more fully, he has a hard time articulating what his experience contains. “Music is so very queer,” he self-consciously remarks, “that an amateur

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<sup>77</sup> Or entire oeuvre, with the exception of Beethoven's 1801 ballet, *Creatures of Prometheus*, in which, for the first and only time, he makes use of a harp.

<sup>78</sup> Forster, *Howards End*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> David Deutsch, “Reconnecting Music to *Howards End*: Forster's Aesthetics of Inclusion,” 165.

<sup>80</sup> Josh Epstein, *Sublime Noise*, xxxix.

is bound to get muddled when writing about it.”<sup>81</sup> Sometimes a moment of music reminds him of something else entirely—“the slow start of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony invokes a gray-green tapestry of hunting scenes.”<sup>82</sup> At other times he feels he is hearing “music itself”—a sense, which he attributes mostly to rhythm, that the music of the moment is “trying to push across at us something which is neither an aesthetic pattern nor a sermon.” Though he says these two experiences “melt into each other all the time,” he has also become convinced that the latter is superior because it suggests a purer, more direct form of connection. “Music that reminds does open the door to that imp of the concert hall, inattention,” he concludes. “To think of a gray-green tapestry is not very different from thinking of the backs of the chairs. . . . The sounds! It is for them that we come, and the closer we can get up against them the better.”

But thinking of a gray-green tapestry, if one is Forster, *is* very different from thinking of chairbacks. It is directly connected to a real experience of a sonic texture (in this case, full-volume, full orchestra major chords punctuating a gradual melody first in the oboe and then in the remaining woodwinds) and represents real associations he has formed in relation to sound over the course of his life. One gets the sense that it was only on account of the surrounding discourse suggesting one should have opinions about how music, taken as a whole, *must* be heard—the same discourse Margaret outlines and critics responding to *Howards End* have in many ways continued—that Forster comes to disapprove of those aspects of his sonic experience that seem abstractly associative as opposed to narrowly sensory and that seem to surface more of his idiosyncrasies when described in language. In the same essay, he writes with some relief about his ability to relate to music through piano performance and so retrain, or newly train, his hearing and attention within the constraints and clarifications of Western classical harmony:

Playing Beethoven, as I generally do, I grow familiar with his tricks, his impatience, his sudden softnesses, his dropping of a tragic theme one semitone, his love, when tragic, for the key of C minor, and his aversion to the key of B major. This gives me a physical approach to Beethoven which cannot be gained through the slough of “appreciation.”<sup>83</sup>

It is absolutely true, as I note in my opening chapter, that the “physical approach” Forster describes here can fundamentally alter or expand one’s experience of musical listening. Just as with any other experience of sound, our “perceptual development” is always ongoing. But what an engagement with literary passages like Forster’s can help us understand—if grounded in raw curiosity about human hearing—is the extent to which we train one another (and ourselves) to limit and compartmentalize our accounts of development. One of the more personally humiliating moments of my time as a music theory student came at the end of a presentation I’d made on a movement of a late Beethoven string quartet. Having given the full readout of my painstaking harmonic analysis, having done due diligence concerning history of composition and reception, and having even rehearsed and performed the work for my peers to the best of my abilities, I chose to close by revealing that the movement’s final measures left me thinking of a girl, before a mirror, dancing. It was perhaps a spontaneous feeling of acceptance and camaraderie that led me to make

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<sup>81</sup> Forster, “Not Listening to Music,” *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 124.

<sup>82</sup> Forster, *Two Cheers*, 123.

<sup>83</sup> Forster, *Two Cheers*, 124-5.

this statement, a desire to share one final affective impression after so much time spent with a work, but the response from my professor couldn't have been more prohibiting. Baseless associations, he scolded as the class looked on, belong nowhere in formal music analysis. It was unfortunate, he continued, but my final remark would have to impact my grade. Granted, this was a professor who later told me with great emotion that he recognized he sometimes forgot the human beings behind the music and that he was striving to become a more compassionate pedagogue. I hold great love for him now, and he has influenced my hearing practice unquestionably, but that moment of blanket dismissal has stayed with me ever since.

To read critical reviews of Beethoven's Fifth in the years immediately after it was first premiered is to strongly challenge the notion that even those whose occupation it is to discuss musical repertoire are free either from "muddle" in writing or from impactful arrest by associative recollection. Helen's third movement "goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end," observing in passing that "there was no such thing as splendor or heroism in the world" and eventually predicting a feeling of "Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness!," finds plenty of company in the following remarks from Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman in 1810:

Glowing beams shoot through this kingdom's deep night, and we become aware of gigantic shadows that surge up and down, enclosing us more and more narrowly and annihilating everything within us, leaving only the pain of that interminable longing, in which every pleasure that had quickly arisen with sounds of rejoicing sinks away and founders...<sup>84</sup>

Hoffman's words in turn presage the response of another critic (initials K. B.) who, in 1814, described the same movement as composed of "tones that tear apart the heart."<sup>85</sup> He too imagines otherworldly creatures, though of a different kind: "The dark gateway to the spirit kingdom opens up; its residents come up and mingle among us; their purely rhythmic sounds clash coldly and stridently with the deep, melodic complaints of human nature." I'd like to imagine that sitting down with either of these critics, or with the many more whose descriptive phrases filled the pages of German newspapers in the early 1800s, could have produced several sprawling volumes of images and associations linked to discrete moments in the score, many overlapping, some entirely isolated. Hoffman's review in fact includes an extensive technical analysis, throughout which he tries to pinpoint some of the notes, chords, and progressions that caused him terror, afforded him relief, or brought him particular joy. But as we are largely absent such reminders concerning musical listening, we might at least, while reading literature, ask ourselves a few questions: What is a materially verifiable claim about sound? What is a sufficiently known sonic effect? How am I instinctively processing descriptions of sound or hearing, and what might this reveal about my own sonic experience?

## Siren Songs

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<sup>84</sup> Wayne M. Senner, Robin Wallace, and William Rhea Meredith, *The Critical Reception of Beethoven's Compositions by His German Contemporaries*, 96.

<sup>85</sup> Senner, Wallace, and Meredith, *Critical Reception*, 114. My unsolicited guess is that his spirit residents are Helen's elephants and her goblins are his human nature.

When I first read Chapter 11 of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, I was a second-semester college junior taking a course called "Proust, Joyce, Faulkner." It was my first serious semester reading works of modernist fiction, and though we moved rapidly through our texts (their lengths hardly permitted otherwise), it was not without an accompanying introduction to their critical canons and reception histories. I learned that although Joyce refrained from titling his novel's chapters, preferring simply to number them, he did provide notes and clues to friends and acquaintances in an effort to make his novel more legible. I learned that among those notes were a series of key terms, concepts, and references to events from Homer's *Odyssey*, divided by chapter, and that in Joyce scholarship, each chapter has come most frequently to be called by its Joyce-prescribed Homeric parallel. This last we may owe to Stuart Gilbert's 1930 analytical response to *Ulysses*—*James Joyce's "Ulysses": A Study*—which constituted the first work of *Ulysses* scholarship, and which widely proliferated a version of the notes Joyce had shared. I also learned that Chapter 11 had been given the Homeric title "Sirens," and that Joyce had conceived of it both broadly and specifically in terms of music. It begins in fact with a list of words and phrases that recur later in its pages and that may, as I was told (per the sparse handwritten notes in my copy), constitute either a kind of orchestral "tuning" or an "overture." Fittingly for the "overture" interpretation especially, the first list item, "Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing," previews the first line of the post-list text: "Bronze by gold, mis Douce's head by miss Kennedy's head, over the crossblind of the Ormond bar heard the viceregal hoofs go by, ringing steel." The last two items are, respectively, "Done" and "Begin!"<sup>86</sup>

Both the chapter and its associated writings are rife with musical references and implications. Via a letter to Harriet Weaver, one of the earliest publishers and proponents of Joyce's work, Joyce famously suggested that the "Sirens" chapter of *Ulysses* contains "all the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*," a strict musical form along the lines of a round, though Joyce's own attempts to define it bore no clear resemblance to any extant structures.<sup>87</sup> Joyce was also reported by Georges Borach, a Swiss businessman who for a time was Joyce's language instructor, to have said the following (though originally in German): "I wrote this chapter with the technical resources of music. It is a fugue with all musical notations: *piano*, *forte*, *rallentando*, and so on."<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the chapter's status as either *fuga* or "fugue" or some other musical form entirely has been a perennial question within Joyce criticism, with many critics going to great lengths to demonstrate, argue for, and understand the degree to which music of any definition is embedded in the work. As Joyce scholar Michelle Witen summarized in 2010, throwing her own hat into the ring:

It might even be safe to say that "Sirens" critics can be divided into two camps: those who believe in the existence of the *fuga per canonem* and those who do not. Those who disclaim the presence of the *fuga per canonem* tend to acknowledge the musicality of the episode, and then liberally interpret Joyce's use of musical terminology as both permission and a springboard to apply other musical metaphors to the episode.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 210–11.

<sup>87</sup> Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, I:129

<sup>88</sup> Georges Borach, "Conversations with Joyce."

<sup>89</sup> Michelle Witen, "The Mystery of the *Fuga per Canonem* Reopened?"

If critical response to the novel's other chapters has largely moved past the early rubrics set forth by Joyce, Gilbert, and others—or if it has at least contested these rubrics to such an extent that they no longer determine the basis of new inquiry—"Sirens" remains entrenched in attempts to equate Joyce's writing either directly with music or with an intention of music, multifariously described and perceived. As a college junior taking private lessons in contemporary classical composition, this pleased me immensely. I was working on a solo piece for piano left hand (an assignment meant to focus my attention on the most essential aspects of rhythm, timbre, and melodic motion) and felt exceptionally well prepared to remark on these same elements in prose. With the eagerness of someone new to literary criticism and to musicology both, I wanted to crack the code, pronounce the form, solve for the relation between music and Joyce's text. I thought I could almost sense something of Joyce's spirit moving within me. But that semester of reading and of composition passed without any declarative statements on my part, and in the years that followed, the chapter lingered in my mind as something toward which I felt an undefined responsibility. I returned to it repeatedly, in person and in memory. I also, entirely unrelatedly, damaged both my wrists and could not perform as a musician for a long while. When I finally recovered enough to return to practicing semi-regularly, shortly before I started my graduate program, I found my feelings about music had changed. I had taken what was perhaps the complementary, if opposite, trajectory to Forster, who through consistent piano practice aimed to increase his familiarity with Beethoven's "tricks" and so induct himself into a community of more specific knowledge. Having believed for over a year that I might never play again, I'd thought seriously and extensively about what music meant to me. In over a year of concert attendance without either study or performance, I'd revisited and found myself deeply valuing the "slough of 'appreciation.'"

In my first semester of graduate coursework, then, I reread Joyce's most quoted "Sirens" remarks and discovered phrases I'd either not been told about or not bothered to attend to before. To Weaver, he had added, "I did not know in what other way to describe the seductions of music beyond which Ulysses travels."<sup>90</sup> To Borach: "Since exploring the resources and artifices of music and employing them in this chapter, I haven't cared for music any more. I, the great friend of music, can no longer listen to it. I see through all the tricks and can't enjoy it any more."<sup>91</sup> I had not, unlike Joyce in the moment of Borach's recounting, at all ceased to enjoy music. But I had ceased to think that a detailed practical or theoretical knowledge of Western classical musical structure and harmony could either wholly account for or greatly elucidate my experience of Joyce's chapter. It could, I believed, connect me to other theory-educated musicians, but focusing intently on reading in this way had started to feel like jamming keys into an unlocked door. As I switched my scholarly emphasis fully to poetry, I felt on some level (though not at all with any clarity) that my changing relationship to "Sirens" had influenced this shift. I was beginning to teach literary classes of my own, to notice how often I reached for a musical analogy at a moment when I wished to talk about hearing and how unreliably this allowed me to account for my students' experiences. I was beginning to contrast my sense, instinctive, that I *knew about sound*, with my knowledge, experiential, that I very much did not. Finally, one afternoon, wholly unprompted, I sat down and tried to write out everything about "Sirens" that I'd come to wonder and to perceive. I had a thought that it could be the opening volley of my dissertation, but as it was not about a poem, this seemed challenging to reconcile. Could I say that Joyce's chapter taught me how to hear? An unhelpful Poundian

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<sup>90</sup> James Joyce to Harriet Weaver, July 8, 1919. From *Letters of James Joyce*, I:129.

<sup>91</sup> Georges Borach, "Conversations with Joyce," 327.

oversimplification, to be sure. Could I say that in wishing to be more thoughtful about my hearing, to be a more sensitive scholar and a more responsible teacher, I've turned repeatedly to a single chapter of a novel as a way of coming to terms with what I do and do not know? That is how I'd like to introduce it now. What follows is my reading in full, as I initially composed it and left it off:

In the eleventh chapter of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom listens. Seated in the dining room of the Ormond Hotel, he can hear just through to the adjoining bar where the conversations of other patrons mix and mingle, and a group of reminiscing regulars sing Irish standards at the piano. He can hear the calls to the half-deaf waiter, and the coy antics of the laughing barmaids, the clank of the cash register, the clack of the clock. He can hear, then painfully recall, the jingling walk of smooth-talking Blazes Boylan, who is off for an afternoon tryst with Bloom's wife, and who will make of Bloom a cuckold before the end of dinner. In a novel renowned for its Homeric allusions, this chapter, which bears the shadow title "Sirens," tempts us to read Bloom in place of a defiant Odysseus who wishes to hear the music that would—and should—kill him. Odysseus, who stops his men's ears with wax and has them tie him to the ship's mast so he may hear the Sirens singing, becomes Bloom, who follows the sound of his rival's keys into a space filled with mocking women and melancholy tunes, all of which taunt him with thoughts and memories of loss and love. The music of the Sirens is a fatal seduction Odysseus narrowly survives, and Bloom, in the midst of music and music-makers, seems likewise lured, likewise resilient, likewise cognizant and evasive of ruin.

But just what, and how, is Bloom hearing, really? Hearing, in the Sirens episode of the *Odyssey*, has readily transparent, predetermined consequences. Odysseus, tied to the mast, does not want any less to steer himself to shipwreck than he would if he were free. He survives the encounter by sheer force of clever foresight,<sup>92</sup> and not at all by intervening consideration. Likewise, the thing to be heard—the song of the Sirens—is of certain make. The work of two unchanging female voices, it is first described by Circe, then perceived by Odysseus, in the same small range of terms: sweet, clear, beautiful, musical, song.<sup>93</sup> This consistency and ease of characterization suggests not only an equivalence between sounds produced and sounds heard, but also a reliability of sonic categorization between individuals, and a further equivalence among a set group of listeners: *all men* are beguiled.

If we use Odysseus's hearing encounter as a frame for Bloom's, we might find ourselves scanning Joyce's chapter for representations of women, for songs and singers, and for music as a thing both distinctly powerful and predefined. We might also lean toward a treatment of all sound or reference to sound as intrinsically musical, and toward a mining of Joyce's text for instances of musicality in word choice and in form. These tendencies—which have made up the bulk of scholarly response to the chapter—are unsurprising; Joyce himself holds the lion's share of

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<sup>92</sup> In the *Odyssey*, it is Circe's highly specific advice, not Odysseus's own cunning, that gets him through the Sirens ordeal.

<sup>93</sup> A range of translations offer up this selection of descriptive terms. What should be especially noted is that, within translations, Circe's word choice reliably predicts Odysseus's.

responsibility for encouraging early readers along similar lines.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps also unsurprising is how naturally these tendencies undergird our discussions of sound in literature at large, and how unlikely we are to think them either cursory or indiscriminating. So long as the *what* of Bloom's hearing seems available to us, the *how* seems unimportant, interchangeable with our own. Just as Odysseus does not ask Circe what she means by "song," or if she has heard the Sirens herself, we tend not to question our fitness to hear alongside, or in concert with, either Joyce or his characters.

But the Ormond Hotel is no isolated isle, and Bloom no blithely enthusiastic auditor. He is, rather, a moderately trained musician with a moderate appreciation for Western classical repertoire and traditional Irish song. He can tell when an instrument's been tuned and when a voice has been ruined by drink, and he recognizes the minuets of Mozart operas. He first meets his wife Molly at a game of musical chairs, then later turns the pages of her music while she sings. The extent to which Bloom has been exposed to Western classical music and to Western classical musicianship keeps him from the sort of rapturous response we might anticipate (thinking of Odysseus) when the men at the bar start singing; instead, we are perpetually reminded of the difference between Bloom's listening experience and the listening experience of those around him. While the barmaids and bar patrons clamor for song, and Richie Goulding, Bloom's lone companion in the dining room, fondly recollects the "glorious" voice of Simon Dedalus, Bloom's own thoughts drift to the relationships songs can sing about, but not save. And though the history of his romance with Molly is, in theory, steeped with musicality, Bloom's earliest memories of their encounters are concerned less with sound than with sight, with the colors of her dress and the *look* of her, singing. "Yellow, black lace she wore," then, "[b]osom I saw, both full, throat warbling. First I saw." If Molly's voice is notable, it is not as a sound, per se, but as a scent or the effect of a scent: "Full voice of perfume of what perfume does your lilactrees."<sup>95</sup> At the Ormond, meanwhile, Bloom is charmed, but not overwhelmed. Of one singer, he thinks, "Wish I could see his face, though. Explain better." He then goes on to consider how communication seems to demand, in addition to words or sound-making, facial gesture, a degree of vision. "Why the barber in Drago's always looked my face when I spoke his face in the glass."<sup>96</sup> Even Bloom's conviction that the minor key of a piano improvisation has influenced his letter-writing dissolves into a meditation on Shakespeare's popularity: "Too poetical that about the sad. Music did that. Music hath charms. Shakespeare said. Quotations every day in the year. To be or not to be. Wisdom while you wait."

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<sup>94</sup> It is in fact difficult to encounter *Ulysses* without becoming embroiled in Joyce's circulation of critical materials and shadow notes for the novel. His side comments have had particular impact on how scholars have approached "Sirens," with his references to musical form taking on a critical life of their own. One notable exception is the chapter on Joyce in Brad Bucknell's *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*.

<sup>95</sup> I think the argument can be made that Bloom's reference to perfume here is a way of describing the pervasiveness or overwhelming sensory effect of the sound of Molly's voice—but it still evades a direct engagement with the sound itself.

<sup>96</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 226.

If the chapter is about music, or meant—as Joyce has stated, and many have argued—to be a kind of music in and of itself, “music” as a term is hardly stable. Even when confined to the space of two rooms, a single instrument, a skilled pianist, a familiar repertoire, and a handful of singers (all men of Bloom’s acquaintance), it has no real descriptive traction. As Bloom himself thinks, “Words? Music? No: it’s what’s behind.” And for Joyce, Bloom, readers, and critics alike, what’s behind is a web of idiosyncratic associations. If, as Bloom proposes, a Bellini aria can be reduced to quantifiable relations between acoustic properties (“Numbers it is. All music when you come to think”), the calculation of acoustic property<sup>97</sup> and the experience of it are not at all equivalent. What Bloom cynically terms “Musemathematics,” suggesting any attribution of power to music is no more than a perceptual trick (“And you think you’re listening to the etherial”), does not discount his inability either to hear music in mathematical equation, or to derive such equations on instinct, as a reaction to hearing music. “But suppose you said it like: Martha, seven times nine minus x is thirtyfive thousand,” he ponders. “Fall quite flat. It’s on account of the sounds it is.”<sup>98</sup> Or, more precisely, it’s on account of Bloom’s particular relationship to sound, which enables *some* perceptions of “the etherial” while prohibiting others. This is something Bloom fundamentally understands, but cannot circumvent.

What if Odysseus had not been tied to the mast? What if Odysseus had survived his Sirens encounter simply by *not finding certain sounds compelling*? In the *Odyssey*, this is an impossibility—there is no way for Odysseus to hear a sound that does not speak directly to him, that does not appeal exactly to his senses as Circe foretells. Indeed, when the lyrics of the song are transcribed in Homer’s text, we see that it calls to Odysseus specifically; the Sirens seem to know him, and in knowing him, seem to know both how to sing, and what to say. Though Odysseus does not comment on the lyrics, only on the sounds, the lyrics imply a hearing experience from which all others are excluded. What looks, to an outside observer, like a long line of identical interactions between the generic song of the Sirens and the generic hearing of passing sailors is, at its interior, only effective because discrete. In *Ulysses*, meanwhile, where the sounds emitted are neither especially targeted nor proprietary, Bloom, eavesdropping, is not even a known audience member. What most makes his experience akin to Odysseus’s, therefore, is neither the presence of seductive, unattainable women,<sup>99</sup> nor the prevalence of melancholy singers and song, nor even the umbrella invocation of music as mystic power—it is instead, and simply, the inescapability of a hearing individual’s response to sound.

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<sup>97</sup> Particularly in the form of Western classical music notation, which seems to be Bloom’s main consideration here.

<sup>98</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 228. This line appears at the very end of a paragraph containing Bloom’s musings on what is quantifiable about music: “Numbers it is. . . Musemathematics. And you think you’re listening to the etherial.” Reducing music to pure relation, however, is an imaginative project Bloom can’t quite wrap his head around. Instead he concludes, a bit unsatisfactorily (as the chapter continues to prove), that music’s to be had not in calculation but in sound.

<sup>99</sup> And I must note—in Homer’s text, though Odysseus can see the women, he neither reflects on, nor reacts to, their physical appearance.

In the case of *Ulysses*, accepting Bloom's efforts at sonic categorization (or, as the case may be, Joyce's), allows us to set aside indefinitely any interrogation of our own hearing practice, and particularly of our practice as it might be distinguished from the practice of hearing at large. It also leads us to replicate the communicative problems Bloom alternately maintains and apprehends. Halfway through Joyce's chapter, a barmaid holds a seashell to a patron's ear, and Bloom, watching from a distance, hears "more faintly that that they heard, each for herself alone, then each for other, hearing the splash of waves, loudly, a silent roar."<sup>100</sup> In this moment, Bloom engages not in an actual act of listening, but in an act of auditory imagination; he is able to extrapolate what is being heard from what he can see of the exchange, and he is able to conjure from his own memory and knowledge the coveted sound at hand (albeit "more faintly"). From this, he goes one step further and unpacks the irony of the shared experience: "The sea they think they hear. Singing. A roar. The blood it is. Souse in the ear sometimes. Well, it's a sea. Corpuscle islands." The sound of the sea is an act of imagination not just for Bloom but for all three listeners; the barmaid and the patron each hear, or so Bloom concludes, nothing more than the sound of their respective bloods in motion, amplified by the confined space of the shell. Bloom is misinformed about the actual origin of the sound—it is not our blood we hear in seashells, but an amplification of whatever ambient noise exists in the space around us—but he does perceive, and perhaps more importantly, the truth of what is actually shared (imaginative endeavor) and its foundational solipsism.

What do we do with a Bloom whose hearing experience seems accessible to us, but, in point of fact, isn't? We are used to having music, in particular, as a stop-gap and a crutch. We might say, for instance, that idiosyncratic aural association is what music, in Joyce's chapter, comes to stand for, or that music becomes a descriptor for all sounds to which Bloom's response is especially strong. We might also say that when we refer to music, we are invoking a space for interpretive idiosyncrasy that does not encroach on Bloom's own. But Bloom, who intuits the difference between *his* listening experience and the Shah of Persia's (the latter prefers the sound of the orchestra tuning to the sound of the actual concert program because it "[r]emind him of home sweet home"), finds himself in a dubious position of discrimination where music is concerned. As his time in the dining room lengthens, his sense of musical sound expands to include "[s]ea, wind, leaves, thunder, waters, cows lowing, the cattlemarket" and the sound of bodily functions—both his wife's and his own. "Chamber music," he quips. "Could make a kind of pun on that. It is a kind of music I often thought when she. Acoustics that is. Tinkling."<sup>101</sup> He even goes so far as to think, "There's music everywhere." Yet, in the very next moment, he draws what appears to be an arbitrary line: "Ruttledge's door: ee creaking. No, that's noise."

When I wrote this response to Joyce's chapter, I had not yet encountered Augoyard and Torgue. But in sharing it after all these years (five), I do find it offers personal confirmation, of a

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<sup>100</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 231.

<sup>101</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 232.

kind, that rereading literature may help us gather our thoughts about sound and hearing. It underscores many of the points I've already made through Mohammad and Forster—that experiences described in terms of consonance may vary greatly with respect to impact and attributes, that references to “music” often conceal discrete and idiosyncratic sonic experiences, that ways of writing about sound (Homer’s *Odyssey*, Joyce’s notes and ephemera, “Sirens”) influence and may unduly limit ways of writing about sound (the critical response to the chapter). But it also begins to demonstrate how Joyce’s chapter, unlike Forster’s, presents us with such a deluge of description about a listener and a sonic environment—description replete not only with onomatopoeia, but with many of the details we might feel we need to imagine pacing, duration, space, timbre—that rather than identifying from some remove with one representation of hearing or another (Margaret, Mrs. Munt, Tibby, Helen), we may be tempted instead to forget we are not directly inside the text, that we are not in fact Bloom or Joyce, and that we are encountering their hearing through language and through hearing of our own. My sense is that when a literary passage epitomizes an “astonishing sensitivity to sound ecology,” as I do think is true of Joyce’s chapter, the critical labor that must be undertaken in order to learn from it with respect to sound may in fact run counter to the deeply human labor to stay connected to an intensely pleasurable experience of reading. How easy it can be to flow along with the currents of Bloom’s observations, to disregard moments of difference in favor of moments of empathy, or to read moments of difference *as* moments of empathy. As I turn to Pound in the coming pages, it is in part this aspect of reading that I want to draw out. It is similar, I think, to the experience of learning about one’s hearing through interaction with another, of needing or sensing one needs to hide certain perceptions to make a reading go or to let a connection stand. Of residing comfortably, if not entirely honestly, in a shared experience of consonance because one can pretend in this way that its potentials are infinite even as one already observes or knows internally its limitations.

### III. TIMBRE

My sense of pitch has something funny about it (if one were to grant that it wasn't merely no sense of pitch whatsoever).

*Ezra Pound*  
from "Dissertation on Rhythm" (1927)

In the summer of 1924, toward the end of a year's vacation abroad, William Carlos Williams visited Ezra Pound in his Paris studio. To Pound, who had been suffering from appendicitis and struggling to get the first drafts of his *Cantos* published, Williams must have seemed the ideal guest. Doctor, poet, and erstwhile fiddle player, Williams heard Pound out on all matters of work and health and was particularly open to discussion of Pound's latest gambit, a musictheoretical work that, a few months later, would emerge as *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*. A few excerpts had already been released that year,<sup>102</sup> and Pound fully anticipated the debut of his completed volume to be a watershed for music pedagogy. In particular, he felt he was on the verge of reclaiming something vital about harmony: that our impression of how things sound—even our sense of a chord's basic consonance—is determined not by pitch but by intervals of time. It was an instinct Williams understood and, to some extent, supported. "We talked of his [Pound's] appendix, renaissance music, theory of notation, static 'hearing,' melody, *time*," Williams recounts in his *Autobiography*. "I have always felt that time was Ezra's chief asset as a music appreciator. A man with an ear such as his, attuned to the metrical subtleties of the best in verse, must have strong convictions upon the movements of the musical phrase."<sup>103</sup>

Yet Williams, like many others who knew Pound then, drew a hard line between respect for Pound's ear as it pertained to poetry and any deep-seated endorsement of Pound's music-related activities. Continuing his *Autobiography* recollection, Williams admits, "His praise of music and his interest in it were to me always suspect. It was necessary for Ezra, in self-defense, though it was far beyond his natural abilities or capabilities, to include music in his omniscience concerning the modalities of the arts. Tones, I am certain, meant nothing to him, can mean nothing."<sup>104</sup> Though Pound attended concerts with greater regularity, and at greater variety, than most of his contemporaries—though he composed two operas and a violin sonata and earned much of his keep writing concert reviews at a frenetic pace—he was widely perceived to lack any demonstrable musical skill.<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere Williams recalls the early horror of hearing Pound at the piano playing "Liszt, Chopin—or anyone else you could name—up and down the scales, coherently to his own mind, any old sequence" and conveys his own uncharitable response to news of Pound's opera writing ("Why,

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<sup>102</sup> Mostly in the short-lived *Transatlantic Review*. The "Antheil" section, featuring Pound's commentary on the avant-garde performance and compositional work of American pianist George Antheil, had appeared in *The Criterion* that March, and the whole text was published October 1924, in Paris, at William Bird's Three Mountains Press.

<sup>103</sup> Williams, *Autobiography*, 225.

<sup>104</sup> Williams, *Autobiography*, 225.

<sup>105</sup> For in-depth accounts of Pound's life in music, including the work he produced as Atheling, see R. Murray Schafer's *Ezra Pound and Music*.

he doesn't know one note from another").<sup>106</sup> W. B. Yeats, meanwhile, made a similar assessment upon meeting Pound in 1909. In an oft-quoted letter to Lady Gregory, he writes of "this queer creature Ezra Pound" who "can't sing as he has no voice." The effect, Yeats concludes, "is like something on a very bad phonograph."<sup>107</sup> By the time of Pound's treasonous radio broadcasts, even feature reporters were in on the joke. A 1942 *Click* magazine article, bitingly titled "Troubadour Traitor," offers the following summation of Pound's life in Italy in the years leading up to his embrace of fascism: "Pound was a clown, a show-off, a funny man.... He held forth like a privileged jester in an ancient court. He became an authority on music, although it is generally known here that Pound is tone deaf."<sup>108</sup>

These accounts, still more of which are cited in the introduction to R. Murray Schafer's *Ezra Pound and Music*, seem at first to produce a coherent portrait of a distinctly unmusical man.<sup>109</sup> As Schafer notes, Pound was himself "quick to corroborate" criticism of his abilities,<sup>110</sup> and the following excerpt, from a letter Pound wrote to James Joyce in 1920, strikes Schafer as "typical": "I have the organ of a tree toad, fortunately, for if I had been able ever to sing 'My Country tiz of Theeee,' without going off the key four times in each bar, I shd. have warbled & done no bloomin' thing else—che peccato & wot a loss to litterchure."<sup>111</sup> Here Pound not only mocks his own singing voice (in writing to Joyce especially, he was conscious of the other man's considerable vocal talents) but also casually fuels the notion that musical aptitude, at least for him, stood at natural odds with his life in poetry. It is a conjecture as much repeated in scholarship as by Pound's contemporaries, leading many critics to read his engagement with music either abstractly or inconsequentially. Launching the Pound chapter of their widely circulated *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell proclaim, "No poet has been more lavishly admired for prosodical skill than Pound; no poet has elicited such praise for his ear."<sup>112</sup> Like Williams, however, they are quick to differentiate the "subtleties of Pound's music"—where by "music" they in fact mean certain elements they perceive in his prosody—from Pound's "own musical gifts and his relationship to musical art," which they deem "perplexing matters." Though Gross and McDowell proceed to mine Pound's writings (including the *Treatise on Harmony*) for its "musically inspired poetic doctrine," actual musical composition, when ascribed to Pound, must be rendered in scare quotes: "Whatever handicaps of tone-deafness Pound suffered," Gross and McDowell remark with drive-by humor, "they did not deter him from writing an opera or 'composing' a violin sonata."<sup>113</sup> To attend to Pound's ear is to attend to his meter, leaving all other indications of his hearing behind.

But tone deafness, better termed *amusia* or, in contemporary layman's terms, "tune deafness," is a far rarer condition than its rampant usage might suggest. While it does pertain mostly to an inability to discriminate between heard pitches within the regular thresholds for human pitch perception (i.e., two typically adjacent pitches sound the same), it is also readily diagnosable and only occasionally the root cause of poor singing (much less poor piano playing). To a person who is

<sup>106</sup> Williams, *Autobiography*, 65, 188.

<sup>107</sup> Yeats to Gregory, letter of December 10, 1909, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, 543.

<sup>108</sup> David Brown, "Troubadour Traitor: U.S. Poet Ezra Pound Backs the Axis," *Click Magazine*.

<sup>109</sup> The very same Schafer mentioned by Augoyard and Torgue for his development of the term "soundscape" and for conceiving of hearing experience in terms of sonic environments.

<sup>110</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *Ezra Pound and Music*, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Pound to Joyce, letter of June 20, 1920, *Pound/Joyce*, 65.

<sup>112</sup> Harvey Gross and Robert McDowell, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, 127.

<sup>113</sup> Gross and McDowell, *Sound and Form*, 129.

deeply amusic, even simple melodies can seem wholly without contour (hence the modern emphasis on “tune” as opposed to “tone”)—an effect that can make the act of listening to many forms of music not only uninteresting but actively puzzling in its desirability to others. Had Pound been afflicted in this way, it is highly unlikely he would have sought out music in most forms, much less made it a central feature of his daily life.<sup>114</sup> A far greater likelihood, and one backed by its own store of quotable commentary, is that such judgments of Pound may be attributed to the performance fallacy. He had simply never developed much skill at music performance and had little practice either remembering or categorizing musical pitch. For all his self-demeaning remarks, Pound seems recurrently to have recognized that he was *untrained* rather than *unmusical*. Pound’s equation of his career in literature with his dearth of singing skill becomes, elsewhere, a conscious decision against the *pursuit* of musicianship and the distraction from literature it would undoubtedly have required. To his mistress Olga Rudge in 1928, he writes, “I can be a moozician WHERE I am already a shining licherary light; but I can NOT yet be a moozician where I aint a distinguished orther. Not going to queer my literary pitch on unconquered countries.”<sup>115</sup> Rudge, an American-born violin virtuoso with a respected career in international performance, had taken to encouraging Pound’s development on a number of keyboard instruments, but his commitment to practicing was avowedly fickle.<sup>116</sup> Notably, Rudge herself never wrote to Pound as if there were any barrier to his learning process beyond sheer interest and industry.

Equally telling is Pound’s nuanced opinion of Yeats’s ear. Yeats (somewhat ironically, given his disparagement of Pound’s singing voice!) was also widely presumed to be tone deaf. As in Pound’s case, the label accompanied myriad accounts of Yeats’s inability to sing in tune, but Pound had his doubts. “There is a great laxity or vagueness permitted the poet in regard to *pitch*,” he notes in *ABC of Reading*. “He may be as great a poet as Mr. Yeats and still think he doesn’t know one note from another.”<sup>117</sup> This is especially subtle phrasing from a writer who so often thrived on hyperbole; Pound’s suggestion, in effect, is that Yeats’s actual ability to hear might exist entirely separately from the sense of his own hearing he had come to internalize, particularly with respect to musical pitch. Further embedded in these remarks is the implication that expertise in poetry, far from precluding pitch-related hearing, might in fact deeply obscure it; because Yeats had no need to discriminate precisely between pitches either in his writing or reading of poetry, he was in fact free to discount pitch discrimination completely as a subset of his skill. Pound continues: “Mr. Yeats probably would distinguish between a *g* and a *b flat*, but he is happy to think he doesn’t, and he would certainly be incapable of whistling a simple melody in tune.” By differentiating the ability to hear pitch from, by turns, the act of acknowledging or accounting for what is heard and the ability to perform specific sounds on cue, Pound describes a man whose perception of pitch is less likely limited than it is unexplored, unpracticed, or even willfully unarticulated—a man rather like himself.

The trouble with “tone deaf” as a descriptor is not simply its misuse; the trouble is also with the broader field of assumptions accompanying the terms “tone” and “deaf” respectively, the latter of

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<sup>114</sup> See foundational articles by Isabelle Peretz et al, including “Congenital Amusia: A Disorder of Fine-Grained Pitch Discrimination” *Neuron* 33.2 (2002):185–91; and “What Is Specific to Music Processing? Insights from Congenital Amusia” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7.8 (2003):362–67.

<sup>115</sup> Correspondence from Ezra Pound to Olga Rudge, February 1928, YCAL 54, Box 5, Folder 128, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>116</sup> This can be derived from a number of different correspondences from Pound to Rudge and Rudge to Pound, though I will address a specific instance later in this chapter.

<sup>117</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 197.

which tends both to be perceived, by those whom it does not describe, as an absolute barrier to sound perception, and to be experienced, by those who identify with it in some form, as a relation to sound that ranges considerably in perceptual quality and meaning. “Deaf” as a medically diagnosed descriptor for a condition of hearing or hearing loss rarely denotes a total incapacity to perceive sound vibrations, and tune deafness, even when properly assessed, likewise specifies not a simple absence of a particular hearing capacity, but a wide range of idiosyncratic hearing experiences.<sup>118</sup> Meanwhile, “tone,” in addition to describing a pitch or musical note, can be taken to stand for all manner of qualities, material and semantic, perceived in a sound. Its use in the context of “tone deafness” therefore encourages the conflation of musical sound with sequences of pitches and of pitches with sound quality or (as I’ll come to elaborate) timbre. “Amusic,” as a term, far better captures the experience of a true inability to tell close pitches apart—one is effectively desensitized, whether congenitally or through brain trauma, to what the vast majority of hearing individuals would consider musical sequences. But this does not also imply an inability to perceive other aspects of sound or other aspects of sound that may be deemed musical. In the instance that someone is actually amusic, only a very narrow subset of their perception of sound is described by the term.

In all truth, Yeats probably was amusic. His accounts differ from Pound’s in that they express an inability to distinguish between tunes, composers, and musical periods (claims Pound never makes about his own hearing), a general disinterest in music apart from its social, communal qualities, and a focus, when attending specific performances, on programmatic narratives, visual elements, and broader sonic textures. But even Yeats distinguishes between the forms of music he feels least connected to and able to hear and those in which he seems to perceive a greater amount of definition. In a 1929 letter to Sturge Moore, after suggesting he can’t know “one tune from another” (and describing himself as “not knowing anything about music” besides), he admits these self-assessments do not always feel so rigid: “In my moments of personal hopefulness.... I begin to think that what my friends call my lack of ear is but an instinct for the music of the twelfth century.”<sup>119</sup> The “music of the twelfth century” differed in many ways from much of the music composed and performed just before and during Yeats’s lifetime, but one particularly distinguishing feature is that its instrumentation was much sparser (it predominantly featured human voices in song), constituting a much simpler sonic environment—one easier, on the whole, for an ear to parse.

When Williams writes of Pound, “Tones, I am certain, meant nothing to him, can mean nothing,” he is both articulating what he has been primed to believe and reinforcing, within his own and others’ conceptions, the series of conflations at the root of the bisected notion of hearing we find in discussions of Pound’s ear. If we imagine a Pound who was both utterly tone deaf (in the perceived, rather than actual, meaning of the term) and enthusiastically, tirelessly drawn to musical performances, then it makes great sense to suggest that his interest in music had only to do with intervals of time. In the words of Hugh Kenner, conceptualizing music’s relevance to Pound, music is the “time art par excellence, it contains events whose time scale is several thousand occurrences per second (the sounds of the notes); events whose time scale is measured in seconds (the notes in the measure); events whose time scale may occupy many seconds or minutes (the structural units of the composition); events gauged in fractions of an hour (the compositions on the program).”<sup>120</sup> And

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<sup>118</sup> M. Garde and A. Cowey, “Deaf Hearing.”

<sup>119</sup> W. B. Yeats to Sturge Moore, letter of March 24, 1929, quoted in Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts*, 337.

<sup>120</sup> Hugh Kenner, “Ezra Pound and Music,” 443.

indeed, we might turn to just about any musical score (particularly those written before the first decades of the twentieth century) for examples of Kenner’s description. However, what is often left out of this summation, particularly when it comes to Pound, is how individuals come to perceive timed events in music to begin with. In the sequence below—an excerpt from the solo part of Vivaldi’s renowned Concerto for Violin and Strings in F minor, Op. 8, No. 3, or “Autumn” from *The Four Seasons*—quite a number of the layered time scales Kenner describes only exist if one marks out events in terms of pitch. Most listeners will group rising notes separately from falling notes, experience pairs of notes that skip up or down a large interval differently from notes that proceed linearly up or down the Western scale, and perceive subsequent sets of rising and falling notes (each set progressing to a higher pitch than the last) as part of a larger series. One needn’t be able to read music to perceive the following crests, each of which represents its own event in time:



Remove the pitch contours and what remain are even bursts of identical sound that are as repetitive and undifferentiated as they seem:



What is perhaps less obvious is that the lack of differentiation in the altered excerpt is not merely a function of each note being precisely the same length and precisely the same pitch. The lack of differentiation also comes from there being no sense, in the notation, of any individual note having more prominence than any other. One way of increasing a note’s importance is literally to give it more notated length or emphasis—to specify in the score that it be played for a longer amount of time or to alter its intensity or attack (its volume relative to the notes around it or the way it is articulated) such that it becomes perceptually freighted. Another way, however, is to give it a different pitch, which, though it might be written to the same length as everything else, would likely be *played* just slightly longer than the notes around it on account of its perceived semantic relevance within a learned musical system. Absent any other differentiating notation, a professionally trained violinist playing the original pitches above would almost certainly lengthen the ninth note of each measure—the apex of each rising sequence—or would emphasize it such a way that it seems longer, and more pronounced, by comparison. When listening to a passage of notes all written to the same length, it is generally the coincidence of a pitch understood by the listener to be semantically relevant and a performance technique conveying the performer’s matching understanding of semantic relevance that allows “structural unit[s] of a composition” not only to be perceived, but also appreciated. A Pound who could not perceive pitch differences but was somehow inordinately sensitive to time events in music could not have existed—and yet the current of commentary that variously assumes, proposes, and seeks to explicate his existence persists.

Kenner, for instance, defends Pound’s scholarly knowledge of music on the basis of Pound’s investment in Vivaldi in particular. Pound and Rudge played a significant role in the 1930s Vivaldi revival, spending ample time in Turin perusing collections of Vivaldi’s original manuscripts, sponsoring concerts of little-known material, and facilitating (Rudge especially) the publication of

over three hundred of Vivaldi's works.<sup>121</sup> Citing this, Kenner writes, "Let us scotch gossip about his amateurishness; he could read a score." But even this claim sidesteps the question of whether or not Pound's score-reading ability included or in any way relied on an understanding of pitch. The emphasis on *reading*—which, as noted above, would allow even a wholly amusic individual to identify pitch differences and even perform them on a piano keyboard—allows Kenner to make an argument about the keenness of Pound's ear with respect to time intervals without concerning himself with the many other aspects of sound perception that likely influenced Pound's approach to music and poetry. If what marks Pound's broadest and most widely circulated claims about music is a reduction of music to intervals of time, I'd argue that this was not on account of an ear somehow limited in what it could hear of musical sound, but on account of an impoverished popular understanding with respect to hearing and a lack of vocabulary and contexts (personal and social) that would have allowed him to describe his sonic experience differently. But the *fact* of his reduction—the central role it plays in his theories about poetry and his approach to his own poems especially, as well as the ongoing presence of the same assumptions about sound that shaped his writing and the writing of his contemporaries—has made it possible and at times seemingly necessary for critics to work solely within his terms.

The word most associated with time in both music and poetry is rhythm, and Pound seized on this word completely. As swayed by others' descriptions of his relationship to pitch as by his own experience (like Yeats, he was recurrently hopeful but repeatedly discouraged), Pound does not merely encourage his contemporaries and critics to consider how poetry and music might be interrelated; he also encourages an outright dismissal of pitch in favor of rhythm. One line of musicology-oriented critics, led by Margaret Fisher and Robert Hughes, has tended to follow the celebratory and affirming thinking on Pound set forth by Schafer who, in a 1961 article concerning the *Treatise on Harmony*, avows that "no modern book on the subject so cogently forces us to see harmony as a study in movement."<sup>122</sup> Fisher and Hughes, like Schafer, embrace the reduction of pitch to rhythm as revolutionary music theory. Fisher's studies in particular are extensive, technical, and musicological in nature; they are interested in situating Pound's theories within the larger contexts of music theory at and before the time of his writing, and they do the positively monumental work of tracing out historical and musicological origins for many of the terms Pound uses in his *Treatise*. They also have the effect of legitimizing, or even normalizing, much of his theory by demonstrating how its impulses were reflected in the work of other thinkers then and since. By recovering Pound as a composer and music theorist in his own right, this critical strain hopes in part to demonstrate, as Fisher notes in one introduction, how Pound "offer[s] a literary criticism through music."<sup>123</sup> But the caveat here, and it is a significant one, is that this mode of literary criticism both accepts and perpetuates an amputated sense of what is persuasive and perceptible about musical sound. It also—counterproductively for its author and her readers—at once senses and misunderstands the manner by which other conditions of musical performance may affect or be enfolded into temporal definitions of rhythm.

Other critics responding to Pound's theories of rhythm have noted their tendency to ring as strongly of the aspirational as of the absurd. Brad Bucknell perceives Pound as "attempting to

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<sup>121</sup> Stephen J. Adams, "Pound, Olga Rudge, and the 'Risveglio Vivaldiano.'"

<sup>122</sup> Schafer, *Ezra Pound and Music*, 294.

<sup>123</sup> Fisher, *The Transparency of Ezra Pound's Great Bass*.

reinvent temporality itself and to give art ('good' art, that is) an absolute and self-justifying basis."<sup>124</sup> This impulse in Pound—his “compulsive desire for control over the manifest”—becomes for Bucknell the driving force behind Pound’s study of music.<sup>125</sup> And indeed, as Pound matured, his conceptions of relative duration and “rhythmic accord” appeared to grow only more entrenched. Why else, he asks, pointing to the metronome markings in his copy of Mozart’s 1786 opera, *Le nozze di Figaro*, “have masters of music specified that certain compositions be played at a certain speed?” The markings, in Pound’s opinion, are clear evidence of Mozart’s “indubitable comprehension of the matter”; they appear to give the precise number of beats per minute at which each section of the composition should be performed: “Presto; half note equals 84; Allegro, black equals 144, etc.”<sup>126</sup> Unbeknownst to Pound, the metronome, patented by Johann Maelzel in 1815, did not exist in Mozart’s lifetime, and the markings Pound so reveres are indicative of little more than the personal preference and recommendation of his score’s editor. Brash errors like this mean even Pound’s more appreciative critics surreptitiously limit their attention to those portions of his theory that might be given some legitimacy, delicately leaving to one side a critique of his argumentative impetus or even of his grasp of the facts. As Fisher proposes: “One practical application of the theory on harmony applied to poetic practice would measure how much time the verse phrases and verse lines take to say out loud.”<sup>127</sup> In this instance, a “theory on harmony” attenuates to a wrangling of relative durations, each one stripped entirely (like the altered Vivaldi sequence above) of countless other defining, emphatic features.

To imagine Pound in his fuller—I’d argue *truer*—complexity would be to grapple not merely with what he professes rhythm to mean, what he imagines his conception of it can offer, or how it moves throughout his writings; it would be also to seek context for his gravitation to the term through a more comprehensive attention to how he perceived and wrote about sound of every kind. It would be to recognize (as I discuss in my previous chapter) that the perceptive functions behind musical hearing are the same as those behind hearing more generally, and that Pound’s alternating avoidance and dismissal of fundamental concepts like pitch may be less an indication of what he did and did not hear than symptomatic of the parameters of the discourses he hoped to enter. As long as he spoke and wrote in terms of rhythm, there were many who were interested to learn of his concerns; to the extent that his writings required readers to suspend their disbelief regarding his hearing and comprehension of musical sound in particular, he found himself losing influence and argumentative traction. Kenner, writing positively about the role of rhythm for Pound, suggests Pound comes to use it as a “kind of metaphor for every manifestation of the alertly working mind.”<sup>128</sup> In my view, however, rhythm becomes metaphoric for Pound in large part because he needs it to do the work of naming and explaining many more forms of sonic experience than it can, in its more literal or formal usages, easily describe.

In the sections that follow, I look at how Pound’s theories concerning rhythm developed in relation to his desire to explain the impact of sonic events (perceived and actual) on his experience of life and of language. Beginning with a brief overview of the concept of rhythm independent of Pound, I then trace the term’s emergence in the essays Pound wrote toward the start of his career and its development through his writings about music in the 1920s—including his unpublished

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<sup>124</sup> Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*, 70.

<sup>125</sup> Bucknell, *Literary Modernism*, 52.

<sup>126</sup> Pound, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*, 28.

<sup>127</sup> Fisher, *Echo of Villon*.

<sup>128</sup> Kenner, “Ezra Pound and Music,” 443.

“Dissertation on Rhythm,” discussed here for the first time. Finally, I offer a few readings of moments from Pound’s *Cantos* that I feel may benefit from a richer understanding of the sonic textures Pound alternately imagined and hoped poetry would convey. Among my goals throughout is to recover a sense of those aspects of sound, both material and with respect to perception and performance, that influenced Pound’s beliefs about composition (both musical and poetic) despite being subsumed by his focus on timing and duration. The most important of these to our understanding of Pound’s oeuvre, I’ll argue, is timbre, to which Pound was especially sensitive. A robust conception of timbre, I suggest, may not only elucidate many of Pound’s expectations concerning poetry’s effects, but also deepen literary critical discussions of how a poem may be “heard.”

### Parsing (Pound’s) Rhythm(s)

What is rhythm? In 1953, Curt Sachs, whose book *Rhythm and Tempo: A Study of Music History*, was arguably the first survey of the topic to extend comprehensively beyond the scope of Western classical tradition, offered the following response: “The answer, I am afraid, is, so far, just—a word: a word without generally accepted meaning. Everybody believes himself entitled to usurp it for an arbitrary definition of his own. The confusion is terrifying indeed.”<sup>129</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines rhythm first and foremost as “senses relating to a regular repeated pattern of sound or movement.” It is, in prosody, “the measured flow of words or phrases in verse, forming various patterns of sound as determined by the relation of long and short or stressed and unstressed syllables in a metrical foot or line,” and in music, “the systematic grouping of musical sounds, principally according to duration and periodical stress.” Each of these *OED* definitions turns on regularity, on amenability to prediction and measurement. Notably for poetry, meter and rhythm are collapsed such that the latter is confined within the former. The rhythm of a line depends, in this instance, on its metrical properties, which are themselves defined by a limited set of quantifiable syllabic conditions (long and short, stressed and unstressed). These are also the definitions to which Sachs restricts the bulk of his book’s examination. “We are concerned here,” he decides, “not with rhythm to be seen or to be felt but with the steady, orderly recurrence of audible impressions, that is, with rhythmical sounds.”<sup>130</sup>

Still, Sachs cannot help but acknowledge the influence of perception on rhythmic sensation. That which we might call rhythm does, in many cases, appear “seen” and “felt,” regardless of its ability to be notated or described. Among the alternate definitions of rhythm Sachs provides is one attributed to Charisius, a Roman grammarian, circa 400 A.D.: *Rhythmus est metrum fluens, metrum rhythmus clausus*, or, in Sachs’s translation, “rhythm is flowing meter, and meter is bonded rhythm.”<sup>131</sup> In this sense, meter, which might elsewhere be defined as “even measuring,” is a mode with which rhythm finds relation, but to which it need not strictly adhere, a reversal of the *OED*’s formulation. We might imagine, as Sachs does, “the rhapsodic strains of a shepherd lonely on the hills”—that is to say, sounds and words grouped not by deliberate timekeeping, pattern, or accompaniment, or even by the memory of these things, but by the idiosyncrasy of spontaneous

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<sup>129</sup> Curt Sachs, “Rhythm and Tempo: An Introduction,” 384.

<sup>130</sup> Sachs, “Rhythm and Tempo,” 387.

<sup>131</sup> Sachs, “Rhythm and Tempo,” 385.

reaction, environment, and instinct, only coincidentally calculable. The hills, the shepherd, the song vie equally for consideration; the rhythm they produce, if we call it rhythm, necessarily bears the marks of each.

Pound's own discussion of rhythm dates back to 1910, when he was just twenty-five, and to two texts in particular: *The Spirit of Romance*—his first significant critical work, comprising a number of his lectures given at Regent Street Polytechnic<sup>132</sup>—and the introduction to his translations of Guido Cavalcanti's sonnets and ballads. Cavalcanti, a thirteenth-century Italian poet admired by Dante, had captured Pound's interest just that spring, and Pound's introduction evinces the unique pressure and responsibility he attributed to his translation task. The more unflinching Pound's belief in the quality and importance of Cavalcanti's oeuvre, the more rampant his insecurities as a young translator working centuries later. "I have in my translations tried to bring over the qualities of Guido's rhythm," he writes

not line for line, but to embody in the whole of my English some trace of that power which implies the man. The science of the music of words and the knowledge of their magical powers has fallen away since men invoked Mithra by a sequence of pure vowel sounds. That there might be less interposed between the reader and Guido, it was my first intention to print only his poems and an unrhymed gloze. This has not been practicable. I cannot trust the reader to read the Italian for the music after he has read my English for the sense.<sup>133</sup>

If Pound's mention of rhythm here seems geared toward encompassing and delineating what otherwise feels ineffable about his experience of a poem and, in particular, of a poem's excellence, Pound's phrasing suggests that the process by which rhythm can indeed "impl[y] the man" is a precarious one, threatened not only by the destructive potential of translation, but also by the erosion of a certain pedagogy over time. Pound, far from casting himself as the triumphant receiver and purveyor of Cavalcanti's rhythm, becomes instead a tenuous bridge to an indirect perception. The "trust" he cannot spare the reader is notably cryptic and seems to extend beyond mere accusations of laziness. It contains within it a fear of readerly impotence, which is also a fear of readerly difference and indifference, and the fear is great enough to make even the self-derived compromise of suggesting but a "trace" of Cavalcanti's "power" seem vastly more appealing than suggesting nothing at all.

At the same time, and as if to shore up these potential faults, Pound offers readers his most extensive declaration about rhythm from this period—one that uniquely and vehemently holds open the possibility that, where translation is concerned, he could get it all right:

Rhythm is perhaps the most primal of all things known to us. It is basic in poetry and music mutually, their melodies depending on a variation of tone quality and pitch respectively, as is commonly said; but if we look more closely we will see that music is, by further analysis, pure rhythm; rhythm and nothing else, for the variation of pitch is the variation in rhythms of the individual notes, and harmony the

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<sup>132</sup> Eric Homberger, "Introduction," *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, 7. Pound lectured at Regent Street Polytechnic from 1909-1910, having filled a staff vacancy after the death of John Churton Collins.

<sup>133</sup> Pound, "Introduction," *Sonnets and Ballette of Guido Cavalcanti*, 12-13.

blending of these varied rhythms. When we know more of overtones we shall see that the tempo of every masterpiece is absolute, and is exactly set by some further law of rhythmic accord. Whence it should be possible to show that any given rhythm implies about it a complete musical form, fugue, sonata, I cannot say what form, but a form, perfect, complete. *Ergo*, the rhythm set in a line of poetry connotes its symphony, which, had we a little more skill, we could score for orchestra.<sup>134</sup>

On the one hand, Pound's assertions about rhythm—that it is “primal,” that it is “basic in poetry and music mutually,” and that it in fact deeply affects all aspects of music—seem the stuff of popular conviction (“as is commonly said”). We might compare the beginning of his passage with these opening remarks from a review of Sachs's book in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*:

The essence of all musical expression is that of creating a feeling of organic movement. And that factor, above all else, which contributes to a work's organic unity, its total feeling, is rhythm... It is rooted deeply in the framework of all living organisms. It permeates the very body of music—its tempo, melody, harmony, and form. Rhythm is, in fact, the most vital element in music.<sup>135</sup>

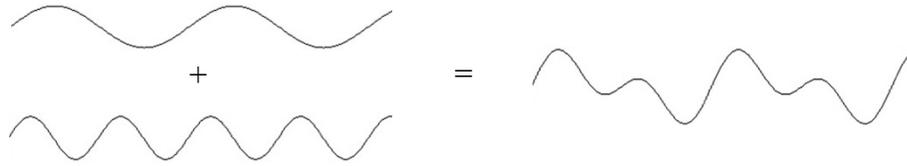
Like Sachs and his reviewer, Pound advocates for rhythm's pervasiveness. He also appears to define rhythm both liberally and comprehensively as “a variation of tone quality and pitch,” or at least to accept this definition. On the other hand, Pound veers without warning (and, for that matter, without consideration for the musical background of his reader) into a series of partially obscured claims about the relationship between rhythm and composition based largely in the physics of sound. At the core of his speculations are two concepts: 1) that all sounds are in fact made up of waves, allowing the pitch of a note to be calculated in terms of wavelength frequency, and 2) that certain ratios between wavelength frequencies may, under certain circumstances, be thought of as ideal. When he refers to “overtones,” what he is actually citing is the series of ratios that, when dominant among a sound's component frequencies, can lead to periodicity and a perception of pitch.

But sounds break down into many more discrete frequencies than Pound is capable of imagining; he gets stuck on the idea that each sound is a periodic wave, and so doesn't quite realize that some of the components of any given sound, however generally periodic, are unresolvable. No sound in nature is a pure tone, but (to recall my previous chapter) the ones we find, on average, to be both consonant and musical are also the ones we are most likely to *assume* are pure tones because they are made up of, or dominated by, the fewest waves at the simplest ratios. In the following figures, we see a sine wave—the shape of a pure tone—followed by another sine wave traveling twice as fast (a ratio of 1:2). If both waves occur at the same time, they produce the third regular (or “periodic”) waveform below, which becomes perceptible as a coherent single sound of its own:

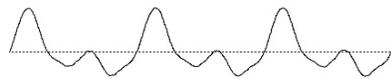
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<sup>134</sup> Pound, *Cavalcanti*, 11.

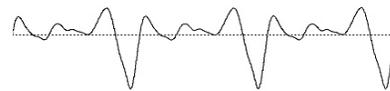
<sup>135</sup> Theodore F. Normann, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 143.



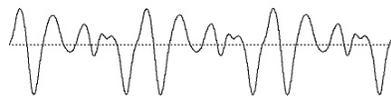
We might say, simply, that each pitched sound is made up of sine waves layered atop one another at varying frequencies and amplitudes. The ratios between wavelengths—the ways in which they combine over a particular span of time—is what gives a sound a pitch. Whenever we can detect a pitch in a sound, what we are really responding to is that sound’s dominant, or “fundamental,” wavelength. When we can further identify what a sound *is* (or rather, what has produced it), we are responding to the relatively stable presence of additional wavelengths, or “overtones,” in unique and specific relation to the dominant one. The more overtones contained in a sound, the more complex its final waveform, with each sound producing a waveform, a *timbre*, that is unique. Here are the basic waveforms of four standard Western orchestral instruments:



Flute



Trumpet



Oboe



Violin

Although all four instruments above are sustaining a sound at the same pitch, they are immediately distinguishable on the page and would be equally distinguishable to most hearing individuals. Numerous elements concerning how each instrument is played may lead to variances (the production of additional or differing frequencies) at the beginning and end of each sound emission that can be less readily identifiable—the breathy effect of air being blown through a flute before it reaches the strength required to produce a pitch, the scratch of a violin bow hitting the string before it can be drawn to produce a note—and variance may at times be both strongly desired and willfully produced within the context of performance (to create emphasis and contrast and to increase the overall range of timbres perceived), but each instrument’s core sound comprises enough dissimilar frequencies from those of its companions as to be consistently differentiable, particularly the longer it is sustained and heard. As Stephen McAdams and Bruno Giordano write for the *Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, timbre may therefore be understood to contribute to the perception of music in the following ways:

- (1) it is a multifarious set of abstract sensory attributes, some of which are continuously varying (e.g. attack sharpness, brightness, nasality, and richness), others of which are discrete or categorical (e.g., the “blatt” at the beginning of a sforzando

trombone sound or the pinched offset of a harpsichord sound); and (2) it is one of the primary perceptual vehicles for the recognition, identification, and tracking over time of a sound source (singer's voice, clarinet, set of carillon bells), and thus involves the absolute categorization of a sound.<sup>136</sup>

This latter characteristic of singularity is what fascinates Pound: the notion that certain sounds have “fingerprints,” and that these fingerprints are the result of distinct parts in reliable relation. To “know more of overtones” would be, for Pound, to discover that ratios determine not only how individual sounds are perceived, but also how they may be perceived collectively. By reducing music to sequences of frequencies, he can imagine that each pitch, held for a certain length of time by a certain instrument, necessitates movement to certain other pitches if a particular impression is to be made; that in fact for each compositional idea there are ideal ratios between simultaneous as well as successive pitches, and that the composers we presume most masterful are rather those most capable (whether intuitively or otherwise) of locating and prescribing these ratios from note to note. Conversely, if given just a record of ratios—that is to say, just the *rhythm*—we could, with the precision of a forensic scientist, reconstruct the whole of the work and, with it, the specificity of its impressions (“score” it “for orchestra”). This system of relations, which he ends up terming “absolute rhythm,” is what he credits for a work’s emotional effects.<sup>137</sup>

Unfortunately for Pound, however, neither the effect of overtones nor the ratios that specify them can be scaled up in this manner. As I’ve already discussed (with the aid of Augoyard and Torge), the moment a sound becomes legible as sound and enters the realm of perceptive development, the material that engenders its effects ceases to consist just of the sound’s own component frequencies and instead expands to include the space within which it moves, the substance through which it propagates, the idiosyncratic bodies and minds within which it is processed. Likewise, there can be no rhythm definitively “set” into a printed line of poetry, though a poet may certainly imagine a poem being read in a very particular way, and though there may be certain similarities among the reading choices of a particular community of readers. This passage, therefore, in marking the beginning of Pound’s attempts to rewrite his perception of pitch as in fact a perception of rhythm, also reveals how intently he wished to account in totality for the sonic impact of works he considered “masterpieces” and further predicts the degree to which he would struggle to perceive, acknowledge, and otherwise come to terms with the variables introduced into his every experience of sound by physical environments, human listeners, and human performers.

A similar set of dilemmas crop up in *Spirit of Romance*, as Pound is presenting his version of St. Francis of Assisi’s “Il Cantico del Sole.” In his introduction to the book, Pound deems poetry “a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions.”<sup>138</sup> It is a statement that echoes his overtone-inspired theory that rhythm, properly transmitted, can ideally influence a reader, and, just as in his introduction to *Cavalcanti*, it prefaces a set of translation attempts about which he holds some reservations. “Il Cantico” is a religious songtext from the early thirteenth century that survives predominantly in translation, and Pound, having no access to the primary text, wants to believe he

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<sup>136</sup> Stephen McAdams and Bruno L. Giordano, “The Perception of Musical Timbre,” *Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, 113.

<sup>137</sup> Pound, *Cavalcanti*, 11.

<sup>138</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 5.

can detect St. Francis nevertheless among its myriad renditions. “Rhythm,” he declares, “is the hardest quality of a man’s style to counterfeit.”<sup>139</sup> He imagines his translation will be endorsed by any who do their own due diligence and assess the text in accordance with the acoustic environment of its composition: “[O]ne should compare the rhythm of the different versions of *The Cantico del Sole* to that of other franciscan poems, remembering that St. Francis’ rhythm is always influenced by the drone of the church services.”<sup>140</sup> But when it comes to identifying the merits of the translation he offers, his considerable powers of description falter. He prefers his version because he deems its rhythm “vigorous” and “ecstatic,” more “impassioned” than that of certain other popular attempts. If there is recourse to measuring, whether of line length or syllable duration, he does not discuss it.

Shortly after, Pound seems to suggest he is in part constrained by language itself, drawing certain key differences between Dante and Shakespeare, chief among which is Shakespeare’s confinement to the English language:

Dante has the advantage in points of pure sound; his onomatopoeia is not a mere trick of imitating natural noises, but is a mastery in fitting the inarticulate sound of a passage to the mood or to the quality of voice which expresses that mood or passion which the passage describes or expresses. Shakespear [sic] has a language less apt for this work in pure sound, but he understands the motion of words, or, if the term be permitted, the overtones and undertones of rhythm, and he uses them with a mastery which no one but Burns has come reasonably near to approaching.<sup>141</sup>

English, according to Pound, is not particularly hospitable to written expressions of human exclamation; skilled as Dante may have been, Pound insists there is something about Italian, or about the correspondence between its written and spoken forms, that permits more sympathetic notations of mood and voice. What Pound envies in Dante (on Shakespeare’s behalf, but also his own) is a language naturally conducive to delivering “pure sound” from writing—to implying for a reader, or in consort with one, not only what is to be said, but *how*. Notably, Pound’s description of Shakespeare’s answering skill is comparatively vague and does not solve for the question of what an understanding of the “motion of words” in fact either enacts or entails. “Overtones and undertones” here read as talismans with which Pound dodges the task of explication and retreats from considering the role of his own imagination and experience of each language.

There are indeed quite a number of real and measurable differences between the average durations, emphases, and pitch contours of syllables, words, and word sequences in spoken English and Italian respectively, and each of these elements may lead to the broad perception of rhythmic patterns distinct to each language. But the aspects of spoken language that would account for the kinds of sonic particularities Pound describes—how, for instance, a written onomatopoeic exclamation may convey a distinct sound to a reader and represent a distinct sound for a writer, and how these sounds may feel more compelling through the lens of one language as opposed to another—are also and especially timbral, a function of how speakers of different languages come to produce expressive sounds with their bodies. Just as the timbre of musical instruments relies not merely on the physical construction of the instrument but also on all the conditions affecting its

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<sup>139</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 89.

<sup>140</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 89.

<sup>141</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 169.

performance, the formation of a vocal sound of any kind relies first on the physical geometry and acoustical properties of an individual's vocal tract, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and oral cavities, and second on the many ways in which they have been trained or permitted to use this geometry. As musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim points out, even singers attending schools for singing within a tradition of Western classical vocal pedagogy and training explicitly to develop internationally recognizable skills in performance can (to a trained listener) be differentiated by school according to the specific range of timbres most present in their voices. Schools also participate in the cultivation of a "preferred national tone" that, when thoroughly taught, can supersede even the most deep-seated vocal qualities a singer may carry from their native language. "A Norwegian singer may be educated in a conservatory in Germany and thus develop a German tone," Eidsheim notes. "A teacher schooled in Italy might teach in Paris, passing on his or her Italian technique and tone ideal."<sup>142</sup> The teaching and development of timbre in everyday speech and spontaneous expression, while far less intentional, is no less impactful or shaped by sociocultural milieus. It is therefore highly variable not just by language, but also by region, by community, by family, and by individual. What Pound provides in his raptures over Dante's Italian and in his respect for Shakespeare's approach to English, is some insight into the development of his own hearing in relation to language, which has led him to prize certain timbres within human vocalization over others and to experience timbre as an especially affecting dimension of sound.

### Formative Experiences

It was around the same time of these earliest writings on rhythm that Pound befriended Arnold Dolmetsch. A renowned maker of ancient instruments, Dolmetsch often hosted Pound in his workshop, regaled Pound with his knowledge of musicianship and music history, and even built Pound a custom clavichord (a portable, boxed early variant of the modern piano that, in Dolmetsch's hands, was enjoying something of a resurgence<sup>143</sup>). It was Dolmetsch's book, *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, that would inspire and serve as quotation fodder for some of Pound's most vehement statements about poetry and music,<sup>144</sup> and it was in Dolmetsch's workshop that Pound experienced some of his most significant, and consequently most formative, musical encounters. In his aptly titled 1915 article for *The New Age*, "Arnold Dolmetsch," Pound recounts his very first meeting with the luthier as follows:

I have seen the God Pan and it was in this manner: I heard a bewildering and pervasive music moving from precision to precision within itself. Then I heard a different music, hollow and laughing. Then I looked up and saw two eyes like the eyes of a wood-creature peering at me over a brown tube of wood.<sup>145</sup>

At first glance, Pound appears to be suggesting, quite playfully, that "the God Pan" is Dolmetsch himself—a lively being, on initial encounter fantastical, surrounded by and producing a music

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<sup>142</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, "The Micropolitics of Listening to Vocal Timbre."

<sup>143</sup> Kenneth Mobbs, "The British Clavichord Society at Haslemere: the work of Arnold Dolmetsch."

<sup>144</sup> Pound, "Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 437.

<sup>145</sup> Pound, "Arnold Dolmetsch," *Pavanes and Divisions*, 143.

hardly of this world. But as the passage goes on, it seems more the case that “seeing the God Pan” is Pound’s (still playful) shorthand for his very first experience hearing and seeing instruments from earlier eras. This experience by happenstance *includes* Dolmetsch, but it is in fact the music in the workshop that seems to transform all it touches. The effect, for Pound, is of a space-time distortion so strong it prevents him from accurately interpreting or clearly perceiving his surroundings until, eventually, the spell breaks:

It is true that I found myself later in a room covered with pictures of what we now call ancient instruments, and that when I picked up the brown tube of wood I found that it had ivory rings upon it. And no proper reed has ivory rings on it, by nature. Also, they told me it was a ‘recorder,’ whatever that is.<sup>146</sup>

Even this intrusion of reality—in which the evidence and context of a more mundanely human craftsmanship, history, and penchant for naming makes itself known—cannot undo the force of the initial impression upon him. Driven to further summarize his workshop “adventures,” he reveals as well the uncritical swiftness with which he attributed the pleasure and surprise of his new listening experience to what he presumed, and goes on to presume, is the innate and blanket superiority of the music of older eras:

First, I perceived a sound which is undoubtedly derived from the Gods, and then I found myself in a reconstructed century—in a century of music, back before Mozart or Purcell, listening to clear music, to tones clear as brown amber. And this music came indifferently out of the harpsichord or the clavichord or out of virginals or out of odd-shaped viols, or whatever they may be. There were two small girls playing upon them with an exquisite precision; with a precision quite unlike anything I have ever heard from a London orchestra.<sup>147</sup>

If the experience, for Pound, was one of time travel—of being transported immediately to a point in the past—however, it’s important to note that the specific instrumental timbres responsible for his journey were previously unknown and unimaginable to him. As with Pound’s ratio-driven theory of rhythm, there is a blurring of association (details about musical instruments and eras learned after the fact) and effect (his actual experience of sound). Though he describes the performance of this music in terms that appear technical (“precision”), his insistence that it came “indifferently” out of every instrument in the shop—in addition to being an example of enjoyable ubiquity—suggests that what he imagines to be commendable about the manner of playing or the era of composition is in fact largely attributable to aspects of each instrument’s basic relationship to sound production that Pound instinctively finds gratifying.

Unlike a modern piano, for instance, whose strings are struck by a felted hammer, the strings of a clavichord are plucked by metal blade, which gives the instrument on the whole a far more metallic timbre and imparts to each of its notes a sharper, thinner, and more compact quality; the strings of harpsichords and virginals, likewise sound thinner and more metallic on account of being plucked by bird quills. Clavichords, harpsichords, and virginals also have much smaller resonating

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<sup>146</sup> Pound, *Pavanes*, 143.

<sup>147</sup> Pound, *Pavanes*, 145-46.

chambers than a modern piano, leaving them each with a much smaller range of volume and quieter overall sound. Viols and lutes, meanwhile, differ from their modern stringed instrument counterparts in part with respect their strings, which are made of animal gut, and which produces a much softer, more rounded sound than metal. timbral differences are compounded by harmonic modes. There is also the matter of tuning, which represents a considerable difference between newer and older approaches to musical aesthetics. Not only would the instruments in Dolmetsch's workshop have been tuned to slightly different pitch ratios from the ones to which Pound's modern ears were most readily accustomed, but even tunings of the same note within a single instrument would have differed. Many clavichords, including the ones Dolmetsch preferred to build, sport two strings per note and are not tuned such that both strings are precisely in unison; rather they are tuned such that their frequencies slightly diverge, causing "beats" in the sound which can be perceived by human ears as a kind of shimmering, unsettled resonance. Players can also use the pressure of their hand on the keys to effect additional subtly expressive changes in the sound like swelling and vibration.

All of these possibilities and characteristics, encountered at once, would have represented an extraordinary departure from Pound's previous conception of music, and his experience of this departure as intensely pleasurable both seems to have affirmed his sense of the potential powers of musical sound and left him at a crossroads for how to describe it. "[O]ur only measure of truth," he opines in recollection and with rare vulnerability, "is our own perception of truth. The undeniable tradition of metamorphoses teaches us that things do not remain always the same. They become other things by swift and unanalyzable process."<sup>148</sup> Moments later, however, he is content to offer his perception as an unquestioned statement of fact: "Once people played music. It was gracious, exquisite music, and it was played on instruments which gave out the players' exact mood and personality. 'It is beautiful even if you play it wrong.'"<sup>149</sup> If what Pound heard in the instruments of Dolmetsch's shop was a kind of music that obviated, in Pound's ears, the need for performative intention or accuracy, it was not because degrees of accuracy and skill on such instruments is unrecognizable or unlikely, but because quite a number of aspects were "wrong" about them (at least within the prior contexts of Pound's hearing), and so largely undifferentiable to Pound from the start. Yet for Pound it became a kind of proof that one could in fact build or compose something so subtly and exceptionally structured that it would, in a sense, be impervious to the vagaries of performance, of interpretation, of passing time.

In the decade following this experience, as his friendship with Dolmetsch continued to blossom, Pound began to write about music with greater focus and intention, treating his regular concert reviews for *The New Age* and occasional writings for other outlets as forums for the development of his theory of rhythm. Within this, he continued to seek repeatedly, if not always especially convincingly, to reconcile his sense of what composers and instruments alone could dictate about their works with the forms of license performers inevitably took and with his personal apprehension of sonic events. These reviews he wrote primarily under his music critic pseudonym, William Atheling, maintaining some semblance of separation between them and his literary work and writing, but then, in the early 1920s, he met the fiery young American composer and pianist George Antheil. Of Antheil, whose works provocatively drew inspiration from machine noises and

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<sup>148</sup> Pound, *Pavanes*, 143.

<sup>149</sup> Pound, *Pavanes*, 146. There's no record to my knowledge of whom Pound is quoting here; as it is Pound, he may simply be putting on a voice.

other percussive elements of urban environments, Pound would soon write: “[He] has not only given his attention to rhythmic precision, and noted his rhythms with an exactitude, which we may as well call genius, but he has invented new mechanisms, mechanisms of this particular age.”<sup>150</sup> Pound not only became a staunch proponent of his music, commissioning pieces and introducing him to other prominent members of the Parisian art scene, but began to collaborate with him on a series of compositions. Around the same time, he met Rudge—first incidentally, through his attendance at one of her London recitals, and then again at the home of a mutual—and they began their lifelong affair. It was in part due to the presence of Rudge in particular that he felt finally encouraged to assemble and publish a summation of all of his thinking on music thus far as *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*—and it was also in part on account of her that he began to question many of the things he had come to believe.

In the *Treatise*, Pound’s proclamations are many, but they are marked by the same distended focus on and conception of rhythm I’ve already outlined. “Rhythm is a form cut into TIME,” he writes, and “a melody is a rhythm in which the pitch of each element is fixed by the composer.” On the way to making these points, Pound upbraids contemporary notions of vertical harmony—specifically, the block-chord teaching of harmony at the piano—which emphasize chordal instance at the expense of lateral motion. Music, he contends, should be approached kinetically, as “travelling rhythm going through points or barriers of pitch and pitch-combinations.” It is the rhythmic interval between sounds-as-pitches, not the pitches in and of themselves, he insists, which determines the strength of a musical progression; the chord must be at all times mediated by careful attention to its before and after, or one runs the risk of making music “like steam ascending from a morass.” Music, that is, bereft of mass and form. “The limits for the practical purposes of music,” he writes, “depend solely on our capacity to produce a sound that will last long enough, i.e. remain audible long enough, for the succeeding sound or sounds to catch up, traverse, intersect it.”<sup>151</sup> Shortly after, he clarifies: “A sound of any pitch, or any combination of such sounds, may be followed by a sound of any other pitch, or any combination of such sounds, providing the time interval between them is properly gauged.”

Though not quite as rigid in its expression as his theory of ratios and overtones (which also makes an appearance), this framing allows Pound to set forward the same conception of music composition and performance according to which a composer has the option of knowing precisely how long a chord, note, or symphonic texture must be held in order for a listener to grasp its particular meaning and intention and a performer has the option either of accurately rendering a masterpiece or foolishly ruining it. On the one hand, his expression of the many factors that can influence how a moment of music is perceived and interpreted by a listener is exhaustive by his standards. “It will make a difference,” he notes,

what instrument the sounds are played on; it will make a difference if one note or several notes are played louder in the chord; it will make a difference if the next chord strikes the precedent chord while that chord is still being propelled from the instruments or if the second chord strikes the other chord as it fades.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Pound, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*, 48

<sup>151</sup> Pound, *Treatise*, 10-11.

<sup>152</sup> Pound, *Treatise*, 21-22.

On the other hand, his theory is a product of his submerged knowledge of Western classical harmony, internalized over a lifetime of listening and cathected to his many additional and varying preferences, which leaves him with greater and lesser degrees of satisfaction in response to certain sound combinations and methods of performance. Its insistence on the existence of an “absolute rhythm,” an absolute way of sequencing sounds and sonic textures, is a consequence of his sense that there exists a form of absolute hearing. In learning to hear and learning about hearing, Pound implies, one is learning toward a singular experience of sound—an experience that, in addition to being shared by all those whose works in and performances of sound Pound admires, is also Pound’s own. In this sense, Pound does not differ from all those who presume their own hearing to be a template, and who work outward from their experience of sound to draw conclusions about what sounds should be produced by others and how music should be made. But Pound’s desire to be always in the most encompassing and connecting experience of sound, to reserve for his own works, poetic and musical, the possibility that the fullness of their implied sound content can be rendered back to him (or, in the case of his translations, rendered by him) exactly as he imagines, leads him to insist on an idea of music notation that can and should convey every desired aspect of each sound’s occurrence. It leads him also to promote an idea of performance as a process of assembly as opposed to a mode of interpretation or response, dependent for its perfection only on the degree of the performer’s will to understand and learn to execute exactly what is written.

Even as Pound registers his own sense of the complexity of sonic material and seems to speak at times in terms of the variability both of hearing and of timbre, therefore, he seeks still to corral the implications of this awareness, exposing in the process how little practical understanding he holds about music learning and hearing development. For instance, though the chord progressions taught to students in fundamental theory and musicianship lessons are indeed rhythmically repetitive and mundane, it is never the case that students learn them without learning, elsewhere, how they appear in compositions and how widely varying their usage can be. Taught in part in order to draw attention to pitch changes that deserve rhythmic attention and emphasis, they support the kind of nuanced attention to sound content Pound wants to inspire, but they do so by requiring students first to compartmentalize and then to systematically transfer their knowledge to other instruments and circumstances—a step that Pound, perhaps on account of his own distaste for practicing music in particular, fails to imagine. Among the most revealing and representative moments in the *Treatise* is a very small anecdote offered without context midway through:

“How did you find those four notes?” said X... in undisguised admiration. “Gee, I wish I had found those four notes.”

Answer: By listening to the sound that they made, a thing no pyanist has ever done.<sup>153</sup>

This is Pound at his least sympathetic and least versatile. It portrays a shared experience of consonance—both the listener (X) and the composer-performer (implied) are in agreement over the effect of a musical sequence—and a rejection of even the possibility of mentorship. It is a particularly harsh expression of Pound’s opinion of pianists, whom he felt were especially insensitive to and incapable of performing differences in sound quality (a piano’s timbral range and complexity, in classical playing, is indeed more limited than that of other instruments, but of course this has no

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<sup>153</sup> Pound, *Treatise*, 16.

predictable bearing on how individual pianists are either inclined or able to hear). And it mystifies composition entirely in the guise of explaining it. While it may in fact be representative of any number of conversations Pound participated in or observed over the course of all his time spent around composers and developing as a composer himself, it mistakes the experience of a sound sequence as satisfying and perhaps even necessary within a particular individual's compositional process for a composer's ability to determine absolutely what sound sequences are impactful and to exert mastery over how they are heard. It conveys an extraordinarily narrow idea of how each moment of composition might progress and an expectation for what can be predictably transmitted between ears and over time, the latter of which Pound would continue to cling to for much of the rest his life despite the many ways it revealed itself to be untenable.

Importantly, the *Treatise* was not the only written reflection on these subjects Pound worked on during this period. After its initial publication in October of 1924, he had a chance to observe his ideas in circulation, to spar with friends, strangers, and loved ones about their value, and to grow restless over his chosen methods of expression. Responses to the book—which in its final form comprised a section containing the thoughts described above, a section advocating for and offering commentary on Antheil's music in particular, and a section of curated remarks from his many concert reviews—suggested an especially wide range of reading experiences. A staff review at the *Paris Times* found it very representative of a work of Pound's and seemed to delight in this fact: "His opinions admit of no arbitrament, his attitudes are adamant; and those who are tempted to differ from him are subject to a sensation of smallness or amateurishness when opposed to the extended labor and erudition that he succeeds in implying in his pages."<sup>154</sup> Of the merits of its contents, however, they had little to say. The most flattering of his reviewers tended to speak just about his writings on Antheil, about whom quite a number of people were interested to hear,<sup>155</sup> or, if they were poets (like Williams), to appreciate his foregrounding of rhythm. Those who reacted negatively, meanwhile, were scathing indeed. A friend of Rudge's to whom she sent the book read it in a day and wrote back swiftly with the following comments: "I was very interested to have it, and... as you doubtless expected, disagree with practically everything therein, and think the "Treatise on Harmony" the maddest thing ever penned."<sup>156</sup> Pound's response, upon hearing this, was both defensive and curious. Referring to Rudge's friend as "your London bone-head" and inquiring as to whether the "pooah deahs" have read "any other treatise on harmony or...know anything about it," he nevertheless asks her to write them back and request more feedback: "Might... ask 'em what there is in the Harmony that ain't so. If I thought something was insane I should be able to say WHY. Tell 'em I am always glad to be corrected, but as yet no one has even attempted to contradict the treatise."<sup>157</sup>

Whether or not there was any further correspondence along these particular lines, the publication of the *Treatise*, which Pound had thought would be definitive and, for many readers, revolutionary, became instead, if not an open wound, then at least a constant and increasingly

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<sup>154</sup> Article clipping of "The Book of the Day" *Paris Times* review dated 19 October, 1924, YCAL 54, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 16, Beinecke. This article was included among other correspondence between Rudge and Pound dated 23 October, 1924.

<sup>155</sup> One response Pound elevates as evidence of the book's success is from "a party named Seavert," an excerpt of whose letter Pound sent to Rudge along with his other correspondence on October 26, 1924. Seavert calls Pound's remarks "exciting," but qualifies this as the necessary condition of writing about Antheil.

<sup>156</sup> Correspondence to Rudge, sender and date unknown, YCAL 54, Series I, Box I, Folder 16, Beinecke.

<sup>157</sup> Correspondence from Pound to Rudge, 26 October, 1924, YCAL 54, Series I, Box I, Folder 16, Beinecke.

ungratifying itch. And so he continued to write, though in a much more private fashion, and to entertain ideas of delivering a more clarified sense of his vision.

### The “Dissertation on Rhythm”

Among the boxes of the Ezra Pound archive at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library is an undated pair of typescripts—two successive twenty-page drafts, paginated and uninterrupted, entitled “Dissertation on Rhythm.” This alone is unremarkable; poring over the archives, one gets the sense Pound left even more unpublished than in print. But most of Pound’s archival remainders are visibly incomplete, partial drafts that trail off mid-sentence or sustain themselves for only a page at a time. “Dissertation” is heftier, its second draft even bearing a musical example (drawn out on staff paper, then pasted to the page) and numerous corrections in Pound’s hand. For all the arrogance of its title, it evinces care and intention. Its contents, moreover, are surprisingly self-reflective.

Undated in the archive (as of this writing),<sup>158</sup> Pound’s “Dissertation on Rhythm” drafts in fact date back to the final months of 1927, when he was anticipating the publication of a new book, *Machine Art* (on the influence of machinery on modern art and performance), and had just overseen the *Treatise’s* expanded second edition release.<sup>159</sup> In “Dissertation,” Pound makes reference to both of these texts as contextualizing precedents, indicating his intention to publish it shortly after *Machine Art* had gone to print, but his optimism was unfortunately premature.<sup>160</sup> Pascal Covici, the Chicago publisher who had produced the updated *Treatise*, and who had agreed to release *Machine Art* earlier that year, instead held onto the manuscript until October 1928, at which point his new partner, Donald Friede, rejected it definitively.<sup>161</sup> As Covici later explained, “Your antheil and your exile<sup>162</sup> numbers have proved a total loss. When your machine art was taken up and opinions were asked from the leading bookstores as to its saleability the reports we received were very discouraging.” No doubt Pound himself understood how poorly his most recent books had sold; he neither pressed Covici for damages nor sought out new outlets for his spurned text.<sup>163</sup> Even the opening lines of “Dissertation” acknowledge the “limited public” to which Pound felt his name was known. And long before the bad news from Covici, Pound had grown discouraged enough to set his “Dissertation” aside, attempting instead to distill its impetuses into a shorter set of writings—the

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<sup>158</sup> I have myself submitted a corrective note to the Beinecke, which should result in more definitive dating.

<sup>159</sup> Typescript of “Dissertation on Rhythm” by Pound, YCAL MSS 43, Box 96, Folder 4068, Beinecke. Undated in the archives, the typescripts may be dated to 1927 on account of a series of exchanges between Pound and Olga Rudge, beginning in September 1927 and continuing on through December of that year.

<sup>160</sup> Pound, “Dissertation on Rhythm.” Full reference reads: “Or rather this tentative LAW results not only from the Antheil mss. of 1923; but from that mss. and from later attempts (not particularly successful) to simplify his notation; and from the performance of about half the opera in 1926 at Salle Pleyel; plus whatever else I may have succeeded in formulating in the *Treatise on Harmony*, and in my added chapter on machines, and in the section ‘The Acoustic of Machines’ in my last volume; especially following such paragraphs as deal with ‘great bass,’ and the continuity from what is commonly reckoned as ‘time’ into what is reckoned as ‘pitch.’” See pages 13-14 in the corrected draft.

<sup>161</sup> See Donald Gallup, *Ezra Pound: A Bibliography*, for complete details.

<sup>162</sup> The literary magazine Pound launched in March 1927, likewise funded by Covici.

<sup>163</sup> Gallup attributes this reluctance to Pound’s unwillingness to charge Covici out of pocket, but letters from the period indicate the extent of Pound’s frustration and discouragement regarding his ability to write on the subjects most interesting to him, as well as his increasing frustration with readership.

“Great Bass” and “Tone” sections that would eventually appear in 1938’s *Guide to Kulchur*. Apart from its brief prologue, which can be found crossed through among the early drafts of “Great Bass,” “Dissertation” was left to obscurity. Pound appears only to have cited it in his correspondence with Rudge. To my knowledge, Rudge was likely the document’s sole reader, and their correspondence, archived in full under Rudge’s name, is part of a 1996 Beinecke acquisition that has yet to see much scholarly perusal.<sup>164</sup>

For a time, however, “Dissertation” was among Pound’s chief preoccupations. It was his attempt to acknowledge the complications inherent in the *Treatise*, to push back against critique that he felt had misperceived both his methods and his intentions, and, by focusing directly on the term that mattered most to him, to write something that could be more broadly understood to be true. The sincerity and importance of this endeavor to him is apparent in his correspondence with Rudge, whose opinion he sought repeatedly and also sought deeply to value, despite his impulse to meet it with resistance and frustration. It was during this time as well that Pound was seeking performance opportunities for the opera he had written first alone and then in collaboration with Antheil—*Le Testament de Villon*, a setting of fifteenth-century French poet François Villon’s long poem, “Le grand testament”—and growing increasingly perplexed by the reading of his musical scores by a wide variety of singers and instrumentalists. He had worked extensively with Antheil to develop a system of notation based in his ideas about rhythm; one that, he hoped, would allow for the kind of authenticity of performance he imagined a properly notated score could provoke. But this had led him to specify note lengths for singing, especially, that could not be sight-read, and that did not, in and of themselves (despite his expectations), bestow on his performers an innate understanding of the specific sonic events (the timbres, accents, expressive fluctuations) he required. The “Dissertation,” then, became an outlet as well for his own feelings of confusion about which aspects of notation and performance would allow his opera to be correctly rendered. Consequently, though the drafts contain much that is familiar in Pound’s posturing (as the *Paris Times* reviewer might have noted)—brashly declarative statements, preemptively bitter defenses, off-the-cuff judgments of excellence and imbecility—they contain still more that is rare, both in Pound and in the critical canon that surrounds him.

The typescript begins in an immediately personal register. Casting a glance backward on his career and on the circumstances of his fame, Pound proposes to “lapse into autobiography” and makes a bid for open-mindedness on the part of his reader. “If my name is known to the limited public, to which it is known,” he writes; “if it is known at all to the present reader that knowledge is due more to my sensitivity to rhythm than to any other one cause, or to any other six causes.”<sup>165</sup> It is through and on account of this narrow acknowledgement of his skill that he hopes to be considered, and not without recognition that this skill has its limitations. Unlike in his typical correctives—most of which are aggressively directed at one or another perceived enemy, or at such vast abstract categories as education, social progress, and poetry—the target for clarification here seems largely to be himself. He has his readers imagine a scenario in which “some person had never seen anything but animal growth, birth or gestation, and were on that account unable to conceive the planting, germination or growth of a vegetable” and then suggests this in fact resembles his own encounters

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<sup>164</sup> The only work engaging extensively with the Rudge papers is Anne Conover Carson’s biography of Rudge and Pound, *Olga Rudge & Ezra Pound: “What Thou Lovest Well...”*.

<sup>165</sup> Pound, “Dissertation on Rhythm,” 2.

with music notation.<sup>166</sup> At the same time, he prompts his readers to recognize that judgments about musicians' "sense of rhythm" are common, and that many individuals, whether known for their sensitivity to rhythm or otherwise, do hold opinions about what constitutes a gripping performance. In his subsequent anecdotes, Pound and music variously perplex one another, particularly with respect to the concept of pitch. But music also emerges as a force about which Pound cannot help but develop sentiments. It is Pound who falls under the accusation, at times self-directed, of "annoying habits" and "incurable" unmusicality; Pound who tries to "leave music (pitch) to the musicians," who suspects "musicians' music" of being "a mystery, possibly sacred" from which he is "by nature debarred."<sup>167</sup> It is also Pound who describes becoming entranced by troubadour poetry, with its history of improvisatory and inherited melodies, wishing greatly to be able to study it in all its complexities, feeling persistently that he had "some sort of sensibility," and receiving friendship with Dolmetsch as a "glimmer of daylight."

Throughout, Pound suggests that he has been trying to make a distinction between rhythm and temporal duration, and that he recognizes his ability to convey this distinction to others has largely failed. "THE PURPOSE OF THIS DISSERTATION," Pound announces rigidly, fully capitalizing every word, "IS TO 'GET AT' OR 'CLEAR UP' THE SOMEWHAT DISCUSSED AND NEVER VERY CLEARLY DEFINED DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RHYTHM AND THE EVEN MEASURING OF TIME."<sup>168</sup> Though he thinks confusion between rhythm and measurement is endemic to all conversations about music (particularly those with little-to-no experience of music performance), he seems to acknowledge how his most emphatic dicta about the importance of timing and about the necessity of assigning specific and immutable lengths to notes in order to compel them to be delivered in highly specific ways represented an unhelpfully compressed view of the larger intricacies of music hearing and performance. Crucially, he takes a moment not just to register his avoidance of pitch, but also to attempt to explain how he perceives and has tried to learn about it. "My sense of pitch has something funny about it," he relates, "(if one were to grant that it wasn't merely no sense of pitch whatsoever)." And in what is perhaps the most telling passage of the essay, he describes his early experience learning note names:

I was as an infant interested in words; and to be presented with DO (pronounced 'dough' and spelled like the verb 'to do') RE (ray) MI (me) FA (not quite 'far') SOL, LA, SI (seed or sea) DOUGH; instead of with variations in a *sound*; all of which different noises were easily differentiable by their combinations of vowel and consonant; and to have the matter further bungled by a CHART with stripes of COLOUR on it!!!! Plus the dulness of being asked about DOUGH! In a life full of other interest.<sup>169</sup>

Here, the syllables of solfège—*do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si* (*ti*, in other practices), each of which is used in standard music pedagogy to name a note on the Western classical scale—occur to Pound as words with their own dynamic sonic properties (including their own pitches and pitch contours, depending on the speaker) and distracting semantic content. He cannot bring himself to associate each word

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<sup>166</sup> Pound, "Dissertation Rhythm," 3.

<sup>167</sup> Pound, "Dissertation on Rhythm," 4.

<sup>168</sup> Pound, "Dissertation on Rhythm," 1.

<sup>169</sup> Pound, "Dissertation on Rhythm," 4.

with a pitch because to do so would be to disrupt or deny his focus on its existence as a spoken word, whether spoken in his own voice or someone else's. What is "funny" about his sense of pitch, it seems, is that he cannot focus on it to the exclusion of other simultaneous sonic events and associations. Within this basic experience of pitch-naming, the timbral consistency of notes struck on a piano (the instrument to which he was first exposed) may even have made it more difficult for him to focus on changes in sound frequency; the timbral dissimilarities between the accompanying word sounds would have been, to his hearing, both greater and more interesting. Though Pound tells this story as a kind of peace offering—a way of acknowledging and directly affirming the commonly held skepticism about his capacity for musical hearing—what it contains instead is a striking example of idiosyncratic learning needs and an ineffective, for Pound, system of pedagogy.

It is on account of admissions like these—more revealing in sum than Pound could have known—that the departure "Dissertation" represents can scarcely be understated, particularly when we consider the fact that the drafts in the Beinecke are in near-final condition and represent Pound's incorporation of numerous changes. Prior to his work on these typescripts, Pound seems to have sent a much less meditative draft to Rudge for reading and feedback. Though that early draft remains unarchived and is likely lost, the twelve-page letter Rudge wrote in return is testament to the seriousness with which Rudge treated Pound's efforts and, ultimately, to the extent to which he worked to incorporate her critiques. In the altered third person grammar that often marks their correspondence,<sup>170</sup> Rudge begins immediately with her unfiltered opinion—"She doesn't honestly think it his chef d'oeuvre"—then encourages him, nevertheless, to keep writing.<sup>171</sup> She goes on to engage his ideas at length, providing context and examples for her primary objections, and ending with a list of smaller suggested corrections by page number. In addition to lambasting his unfounded criticisms concerning singers, challenging his understanding of rhythmic complexity, and questioning the responsibility of his word choice, she addresses Pound's seeming inability to empathize with the physical aspect of performance. She perceives that Pound cares less about notation than execution and that he is less interested in strict faithfulness to a score than in the feeling of commitment and authenticity he can derive from a live performance. She perceives that he struggles to differentiate between these things. She also points out that Pound's tendency to praise her renderings of his scores and to point to her performances as indication that his hyper-specific approach to notation can succeed is based on a false assumption. "I have told you over and over that if I got the stuff right from the George mss," she writes, "it is because I am following the words which I know practically by heart."<sup>172</sup> Memorization, rehearsal, personal history, tradition—these are Rudge's explanations for instinct and for what Pound would consider a "good" ear. Along the way, she implores him to explore the physical dimensions of practicing for himself:

She also takes the occasion to beg of him once more to consider the question of notation from the performer's point of view. If before criticising singers he would in common justice and decency learn himself to sing a simple rhythm from notes (no need to bother about pitch, just the rhythm on one note) he would find out why the

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<sup>170</sup> A quirk developed within the first years of their acquaintance, and which they shared.

<sup>171</sup> Correspondence from Rudge to Pound, 20 August [1927], YCAL 54, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 25, Beinecke.

<sup>172</sup> Rudge to Pound, 20 August [1927], backside of page 3. Rudge numbered the sheets, so I am using her numbering here.

notation of the George mss of [Pound's opera *Villon*] is impossible in use—though it is an exact record of what was done at the time.<sup>173</sup>

For Pound's edification, she even includes the following rhythmic example:



“How do you expect a musician to measure,” she concludes, “—what by?” Though Rudge's example shows regular bar marks dividing groups of notes, no two groups contain the same number of beats as the first group. This is not actually one of Pound's sequences, but it resembles many passages from *Villon* as well as his other compositions. The point she is interested in making lies with differentiating between the constant calculation and marking out of lengths of time on an infinitely malleable scale (being able to sense how long a note is based purely on a knowledge of tempo) and the actual experience of music-making; the latter is a constant real-time reckoning and re-measuring of how to render the length and performance of each note on the basis of having internalized how something, broadly, might sound and then using this knowledge to navigate more localized, spontaneously construed, and ultimately unnotatable relationships. Pound needs, she insists, to develop a sense of the give-and-take between notation and performance and to stop “confusing time and accent.” Tellingly, she points out his tendency to use the vocabulary of duration to describe and attempt to influence non-durational aspects of sound: “You...would say you wanted a note longer when you wanted it more sung—and shorter for an accent.”<sup>174</sup>

Faced with Rudge's critique, Pound tempered “Dissertation” substantially. In a letter dated November 1, 1927, he expresses the ongoing challenge of revisions:

Morning blown on umpteenth effort to make yet again once more for another time an absolllotly clear statement re/ greatbass : rhythm vs. measure. Considering her mentioned numerous afflictions he will not enc. same at this juncture to further annoy her. Having writ which, he is compelled to rewrite the whole goddam five front pages, of the damn exposition.<sup>175</sup>

Pound's recourse to personal biography, especially, appears to be a direct answer to Rudge's requests that he consider the position of the performer and “learn himself to sing a simple rhythm from notes.”<sup>176</sup> The longer he worked and ingested Rudge's commentary, the more he seems to have become aware of the document as a form of retraction. Introducing what he calls, tentatively, a “law of the variants,” he confesses there may be instances when notation and performance should deviate, effectively reversing much of the work laid out in his *Treatise*. “I don't know how to put it more simply,” he writes. “The rhythmic player can take not ‘all sorts,’ but an apparently heteroclite mass of liberty and ‘get away with it’.” And later, “This is not an apologia for the use of uneven bars. It is

<sup>173</sup> Rudge to Pound, 20 August [1927], backside of page 1.

<sup>174</sup> Rudge to Pound, 20 August [1927], frontside of page 6.

<sup>175</sup> Correspondence from Pound to Rudge, 1 November 1927, YCAL 54, Box 5, Folder 114.

<sup>176</sup> Rudge to Pound, letter of August 20, 1927, YCAL 54, Box 1, Folder 25.

an attempt to give an equation for the law of unevenness—to define the law of unevenness. An equation for the way in which the unevenness probably exists when its result is gratifying to the ear, to our sense of motion.”<sup>177</sup> He even preemptively offers himself up as an example, recognizing that he has likewise struggled to keep his own performances and preferences consistent. Of his participation in the performances of *Villon*, he writes, “I did not do the damn thing exactly the same every time,” and acknowledges that even the most skilled of performers can be afflicted by “untimely lacuna.”<sup>178</sup> Finally, he admits that performances that may sound erratic to one listener may not to another—that distinct personal preferences, some marked by strong emotion, may come into play:

Certain variants in the timing do not distress me. Certain “errors,” or certain sorts of “error” I do not make. On the other hand (or ear) certain deadnesses produced by even good performers from the most improved notation fill me with rage, horror, dire combustion and complete loss of patience.

Advocating for precision and strict proportion had characterized his work on rhythm for so long, it is no wonder he labored to such an extent over his “Dissertation” admissions. Through them, Pound grapples with the reality of a composition escaping, in performance, the precise strictures of its notation while still managing to sound both recognizable and convincing to a multitude of different listeners. He feels driven to acknowledge that rhythmic ability comprises both a capacity for notation-prescribed “evenness” (faithfulness to the score, as distinct from predictable, or evenly spaced, beating) and a sense of when to let this capacity lapse—indeed, a sense of when such lapses are not only possible, but necessary. This is not to say he at any point gives up on subsuming this concession within a larger framework he can control. Pound’s use of the term “equation” with respect to his proposed “law of unevenness” refers back to his interest in the mathematics of the harmonic series, which he thinks may concretely explain why certain deviations work and others do not. And his recourse to harmonics, as in previous cases, still occurs in large part because he wants to dehistoricize (and delocalize) “good” performances, thereby reverting the power of a piece of music (and, by extension, of a poem) back to the piece itself and thus to the instincts of its composer. But composers and performers alike have navigated the promise and lack represented by musical notation for centuries, in large part by acknowledging the role of a score’s interpreters—the trainings, lineages, and specific interpretive skills to which a piece-as-notation may be subjected, as well as the extensive number of factors influencing an individual’s perception of sound. No doubt this is why Rudge so deflated Pound’s sense that his “Dissertation” would find readership (she encouraged him, instead, to write specifically about his operatic endeavors—to help his would-be audience invest in his understanding of opera’s relevance to poetry). Pound’s “Dissertation” contains little of use to musicians; if anything, it reads reductively, and perhaps a bit desperately, as it attempts to explain performance decisions and conditions for which musicians have already developed comfortable (if not necessarily convenient) rubrics.

And in the end, of course, Pound could not bring himself to publish. Pound’s letters to Rudge immediately following the initial publication of *Treatise* crow of its anticipated success and transformative potential. In contrast, his discussion of “Dissertation” bears far greater frustration and humility. Rudge, too, it seems, was driven to some concern over his work; so much so that Pound

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<sup>177</sup> Pound, “Dissertation on Rhythm,” 13, 18-19.

<sup>178</sup> Pound, “Dissertation on Rhythm,” 9-10.

brushes her off in a letter that same November: “As to his articulo, why worry. Hasn’t he rewrit it several times since the vershun she has???”<sup>179</sup> When he finally gives up the document a few weeks later, turning his attention fully to the shorter fragments that would enter *Guide to Kulchur*, he is entirely dismissive. “He is writing the ‘Great Bass.’ Which is 4 pages instead of the godnozowamany of the Dis. on Rhythm.”<sup>180</sup> By 1934’s *ABC of Reading*, Pound had returned to his old formulations. His short essay, “Treatise on Metre,” offers, in lieu of “a good treatise on prosody,” several pages suggesting why none can, or should, be written. To aspiring poets, the only “answer” Pound provides is this familiar one: “LISTEN to the sound that it makes.”

The openness of “Dissertation,” therefore, is an anomaly Pound consciously turned away from. As I’ve mentioned, the only writing to appear both in the Beinecke’s “Dissertation on Rhythm” folders and among its folders for “Great Bass”—albeit crossed through in the latter, and finally discarded—is a short and cryptic prologue. I reproduce it here:

There is nothing duller than the clock-tick, nothing more infuriating than the sound of the metronome, that bane and instructor of performers.

We have a need for something to beat “against the measure.”

There is a phantom contrapunto in all good verse, by which I mean that one line beats *against* the memory of the movement of the line or the lines preceding—and, naturally, establishes its own movement for succeeding verses to beat against.<sup>181</sup>

Those who work in poetry might see the ghost of Gerard Manley Hopkins in these words. Hopkins once wrote of what he called “counterpoint rhythm,” which he defined as the “superinducing or *mounting* of a new rhythm upon [our recollection of] the old.”<sup>182</sup> But where Hopkins imagined always a “natural or standard foregoing rhythm,” which subsequent lines either clearly adopt or concretely defy<sup>183</sup>—and where Hopkins’s discussion reduces primarily to what the *OED* defines as the rhythm of prosody (stressed and unstressed syllables)—Pound’s vision in the “Dissertation” is ultimately of a more intricately, and even infinitely, expanding sense of sounds and proportions. “Beating against the measure” is not itself an absolute or strictly calculable process; it is reactive, improvisatory, closer in impulse, perhaps, to the “rhapsodic strains” of Sachs’s lonely shepherd (left to linger, uninterrogated) than Pound would be willing to admit. At one point in her letter of critique, interrogating Pound’s desire for others simply to understand and work within his chosen terminologies, Rudge asks, “Do you have your books printed phonetically because your own spelling is bad?” And of course Pound *does not* have his books printed phonetically. He recognizes that there are certain standards for communication by which even he, in his published works and critical writings, must abide. But phonetic spellings, idiosyncratic abbreviations, onomatopoeic

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<sup>179</sup> Correspondence from Pound to Rudge, 19 November, 1927, YCAL 54, Box 5, Folder 116, Beinecke.

<sup>180</sup> Correspondence from Pound to Rudge, 16 December 16, 1927, YCAL 54, Box 5, Folder 118, Beinecke.

<sup>181</sup> Pound, “Dissertation on Rhythm,” 1.

<sup>182</sup> Hopkins, “Author’s Preface,” *Poems*.

<sup>183</sup> Unexpected reversals in a poetic line, Hopkins writes, “must be due either to great want of ear or else is a calculated effect, the superinducing or mounting of a new rhythm upon the old; and since the new or mounted rhythm is actually heard and at the same time the mind naturally supplies the natural or standard foregoing rhythm, for we do not forget what the rhythm is that by rights we should be hearing, two rhythms are in some manner running at once and we have something answerable to counterpoint in music, which is two or more strains of tune going on together, and this is Counterpoint Rhythm.” This is distinct from Hopkins’s “Sprung Rhythm,” which “cannot be counterpointed.”

exclamations, and emphatic uses of capitalization, underlining, and punctuation do mark his personal correspondence. The assumption is that the reader who knows him also knows how he might speak his own words, and his distortions of language upon the page are his cues for others to hear his voice. In some respects, to be heard by everyone in this way is the impossible dream of Pound's poetry—a dream that, in "Dissertation" at least, he could recognize as impossible.

At a time when many of Pound's other cohesive projects and essays, including the full text of *Machine Art*, have seen posthumous investigation and circulation, the silence around "Dissertation" seems, to me at least, conspicuous. Though it appears in the Beinecke finding aid (and now, on account of my project, in their digital library)—though it was presumably acquired along with the main bulk of Pound's papers in 1973—most external clues to its existence had, at the time of my visit, been left untouched. Even Hughes and Fisher, coming across the same letter from Rudge discussed above, considered it to be a "misconceived critique of the *Treatise on Harmony*."<sup>184</sup> It was simpler, in other words, to conclude that Rudge had merely misnamed the document she was responding to ("dissertation" appears in the first sentence of her letter), than to imagine the existence of another document entirely, much less one bearing evidence of Pound's ability not only to seek out, but to actively absorb, Rudge's critique. In defense of Hughes and Fisher, Rudge's letter was, at the time of my own research, both undated (save for the day, "20") and misarchived in a catch-all "[1924?]" folder. However, this hardly explains the further errors in the Hughes and Fisher oeuvre, which assigns the letter two separate and incorrect dates in two separate publications (October 20, 1924 and December 22, 1924) and claims a "surprising dearth of commentary on Pound's music composition activity in [Pound and Rudge's] vast correspondence."<sup>185</sup> As I've aimed to demonstrate, this couldn't be further from the truth. Restored to its proper context among the letters Rudge and Pound exchanged toward the end of 1927 (by my estimation, the letter itself dates to August 20 of that year),<sup>186</sup> Rudge's critique is no longer an epistolary one-off, unacknowledged and without reply, but part of her lifelong attempt to clarify Pound both to himself and to the world, or at least to that "limited audience" to which he felt as opaque as indebted.

## Reading the *Cantos*

In this final section, I want to spend just a few moments with Pound's poetry—to move from my discussions of his sonic experience to a consideration of how these discussions might influence our readings of his creative work. Having focused in this chapter on those aspects of Pound's hearing that were most in doubt over the course of his lifetime, I think it may be useful now to recall the degree to which Pound was and continues to be exalted for his poems and for the relationship to hearing they have seemed most to represent. Michael Ingham, in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, captures this form of exaltation precisely:

When we say someone has a beautiful voice we usually mean a speaking or singing organ of great resonance, power, suppleness, freedom, range, capable of an infinitude

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<sup>184</sup> Fisher, "The Transparency of Ezra Pound's Great Bass."

<sup>185</sup> Fisher and Hughes, *Perspectives on Cavalcanti*.

<sup>186</sup> The letter itself is marked "20," it has an addendum, however, marked "22 lunedì"—assuming only a few months, rather than a year, passed between Olga's response to Pound's typescript and his acknowledgement of her response, August was the only month in 1927 to have a Monday fall on the 22nd day of the month.

of nuance, a strangely affecting *Gestalt* through which we experience a thrill akin to the sensation of flight. But there is another kind of voice than the merely frequency producing one, another kind of singer than the paragon of high notes—certain poets, who, either naturally, or by acquisition, have the ability to compose words which prescribe the voice which should utter them, poets with an ‘ear,’ poets who never separate word from sounding tone and the percussive rhythm of consonants. The list of such poets is relatively short but Pound is high on the list.<sup>187</sup>

This passage is remarkable to me not least because it echoes Pound’s praise of Dante and, in so doing, suggests Pound manages to accomplish the very thing I’ve insisted throughout this project no poet can do: “compose words which prescribe the voice which should utter them.” It is a suggestion much like Pound’s theory of rhythm, which would perceive in a word of a text or a note of a score not an indication for some semblance of that word or that note to be heard but the denotation of its every element as material sound—its attack and decay, its pitch and pitch contour, its loudness relative to its before and after, every frequency of its timbre.

Of course, when pressed, I imagine Ingham would not take his own remarks quite so literally; the next two clauses of his sentence already give alternate definitions for the condition of “prescription.” Placing “ear” in quotes, Ingham shifts from a description of what poems may compel readers to hear to the implication that poems are representative of how poets themselves hear (invoking the entire mythos of the “poet’s ear” in the process), and then to an assertion about the more discrete way this hearing enacts itself on language—a refusal to “separate,” whether by choice or by default, “word from sounding tone and the percussive rhythm of consonants.” Still, what connects all these statements is their foregrounding of compulsion and instinct, the degree of willfulness and control they align with the writing of poetry (for at least a handful of poets, Pound among them), and the degree of involuntary complicity they attribute to the reader. Like Adelaide Morris’s association of modern poetry with a “surround of sound” and K. Silem Mohammad’s declarations about objectively measurable euphony, they underscore how much a reader may feel ushered to read in a certain way, to notice certain aspects of language. They suggest an experience of reading like Pound’s experience of Dolmetsch’s workshop, a totalizing transport if not to another era then at least to another acoustic space or into another physically vocal body. But they also suggest so much else about Pound’s Dolmetsch moment and so much that I have already mentioned—that this feeling of transport and even of usurpation depends for its effect on what one has and has not experienced before, on what one can and cannot detect about how a sound is made or what makes up its sense of dimensionality within the context of one’s own hearing.

If we look at the opening lines of Pound’s *Cantos* from within the frame of a hearing individual steeped in Western canonical knowledge of British and American poetry and a lifetime of English language learning, there are many things we may indeed feel compelled to hear:

And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward

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<sup>187</sup> Michael Ingham, “Pound and Music,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, 236.

Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.<sup>188</sup>

The content of these lines is itself transportative—calling strongly upon the language of seafaring within the context of ancient epics and gods, evoking Pound's dictum that "an epic is a poem containing history,"<sup>189</sup> offering a direct reference to Circe and therefore to Homer's *Odyssey*, to a traditional of oral storytelling, to a language (Ancient Greek) dominated by vowels and acute sensitivity to syllable length, and to a poetic form centered around the dactyl (a long syllable followed by two short or unstressed ones). At their most basic level, these lines are filled with plosives and fricatives that, if pronounced with emphasis, may come to feel like beats—if not exactly even, at least frequent enough to seem vital and incessant, grouped together at fairly regular intervals by line breaks and semantic pauses. To read this poem aloud, therefore, might be to dwell at the intersection of its *ch-shh-sss-swa-fa*'s and of its hard *b*'s, hard *p*'s, hard *c*'s, its *ka*'s. "Set keel to breakers," "swart ship," "Bore sheep aboard her," "Circe's this craft." The fricatives may lead one to hiss, lisp, and drag; they may seem to linger, merge, build on themselves. The plosives, meanwhile, may seem to truncate or interrupt each line's contrasting timbres, to erect hard edges within and against which all other speech sounds are contained.

If we are like Mohammad and inclined to notice iambs, we may notice that the very first pair of syllables may be counted as an especially emphatic one—"And *then*," which semantically places us in medias res and may have the effect of propelling us forward into the poem not just on account of its grammar and of the temporal directionality of the word "then," but also on account of moving vocally from a weaker syllable to a stronger one. Having begun the poem in this way, we may also be inclined to notice other instances of similar propulsion and of its reversal, such as when the iambs that begin the second line suddenly merge into a dactyl and trochees (a long syllable followed by a single short or unstressed one): "Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and." Sensitivity to meter and knowledge of Pound's own ability to imitate metrical patterns of every kind might suggest these interminglings of poetic feet are in fact a deliberate effort to evoke Homer within the confines of English poetry's more iambic preferences and tendencies. Pound's manner of describing the environments of the poem may further seem to reinforce an approach to reading that pays explicit attention to the experience and suggestion of contrast. While the first few cantos continue to give us phrases like "sea sports in the spray-whited circles of diff-wash," "cold-welter, close cover," "sea-break from stern forrards," the hard *c* becomes, in later cantos, part of the literal *cutting* of landscape, flesh, and air: "Hay new cut on hill slope," "Aerial, cut in the aether," "wave pattern cut in the stone," "blossom cut on the wind." A cossack's cut is, in Canto XVI, a moment of revolution, and it may seem no coincidence that Pound moves, in Canto XXX, to the cut of text itself: letter-cutters, die-cutters, the triple cross-cut of Roman numerals that mark the ending of his epic's first section: "*Explicit canto / XXX.*" When Pound's Artemis wails in this canto "Agaynst Pity," it is out of bitter nostalgia for neat edges. "Nothing is now clean slayne /," she despairs, "But rotteth away." The experience of clean slaying, we might say, is part of the forcefulness of Pound's lines and reflects Pound's own nostalgia for (insistence on) the precision, emphasis, and clarity he associates (again recalling Dolmetsch's workshop) with another time.

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<sup>188</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 3.

<sup>189</sup> Pound and Donald Hall, "Ezra Pound, The Art of Poetry No. 5," *The Paris Review*. This was preceded by his statement that "an epic is a poem including history," which appears in his essay "Date Line."

“We appear to have lost,” wrote Pound in an essay on Cavalcanti and medievalism, “the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies... , magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible.”<sup>190</sup> The essay, which Pound published in his 1934 collection *Make It New*, represents every decade of his thinking from 1910 onward, and there are moments throughout the *Cantos*—throughout the first thirty cantos in particular—that suggest Pound is engaged in the effort of recovery, of preserving for his poetry, for his readers, and for himself an approach to language that allows reading to become a conjuring act, and that situates within the “cut” of words an immense and transformative power. The further one moves into the *Cantos*, the more one might witness an implication of metamorphosis in the wake of “cutting” events. In Canto XXI, we are told, “And the boughs cut on the air, / The leaves cut on the air.”<sup>191</sup> In Canto XXVII, however, this becomes “The air burst into leaf,”<sup>192</sup> which in turns becomes, in Canto XXIX, “The trees melted in air.”<sup>193</sup> How does that which cuts come to melt in air? It is as if the fact and recognition of a cut—which, as I suggest above, we may experience in spoken language as an emphasis, as an accent, as a shift in timbre (a literal difference in the size and shape of one’s mouth upon a syllable’s pronunciation)—becomes a point of entry for other forms of perception, for an experience of one’s broader environment or of the environment of the poem as “a world of moving energies.”

Once one is on the hunt for this way of reading, other hints of Pound’s hopefulness toward a condition of transformation abound. In Canto XIII, Pound renders in English a reflection that appears in Guillaume Pauthier’s French translation of a series of Chinese philosophical texts (*Les livres sacrés de l’Orient*) and is attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Kung. In its original French, the reflection reads as follows and may be translated into English as I suggest directly after:

Le Philosophe dit : J’ai presque vu le jour où l’historien de l’empire laissait des lacunes dans ses récits (quand il n’était pas sûr des faits); où celui qui possédait un cheval, le prêtait aux autres pour le monter; maintenant ces moeurs sont perdues.<sup>194</sup>

*The Philosopher says : I almost saw the day when the historian of the empire left blanks in his reports (when he was unsure of the facts); when he who owned a horse lent it out for others to ride; now these customs are lost.*

But Pound, who could have likewise translated it exactly, offers instead the following:

And even I can remember  
A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,  
I mean for things they didn’t know,  
But that time seems to be passing.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Pound, “Cavalcanti: Medievalism,” *Literary Essays*, 154.

<sup>191</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 99.

<sup>192</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 132.

<sup>193</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 146.

<sup>194</sup> Guillaume Pauthier, *Les livres sacrés de l’Orient*, 208.

<sup>195</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 60.

Pound is uninterested in the lending of horses, but he does care about the leaving of blanks. Deviating from Pauthier's French, Pound uses "can remember" in place of Pauthier's "*presque vu*" ("almost saw"), and his "seems to be passing" considerably softens the "*sont perdues*" ("are lost") of the original text. What the philosopher could only *almost* see—an era of humility in the absence of knowledge, as well as of hope for the restoration of what was lost—Pound re-renders as an obvious and ready memory ("*even* I can remember"). He then tempers the admission of loss into an ongoing perception of the semblance of departure ("*seems* to be passing"—which is to say, the time in question hasn't passed yet). Past and present are here made bridgeable. There remains as yet an opportunity to preserve a mode of attention that makes room for and speculates in the interest of future comprehension. There remains as yet an opportunity to retrieve a certain skill for humility, an awareness of the blanks which are due vibration. In fact, if in reading the above lines, one had not thought to consider them within the context of hearing or of the project of poetry, Pound follows them immediately with a pair of additional statements, with which Canto XIII ends:

And Kung said, "Without character you will  
be unable to play on that instrument  
Or to execute the music fit for the Odes.  
The blossoms of the apricot  
blow from the east to the west,  
And I have tried to keep them from falling."<sup>196</sup>

But if the idea of blank-leaving suggests a kind of optimism on the part of the poet-historian, an awareness of the limits of notation—if it recalls Pound's efforts to bring forward in his Cavalcanti translations but a "trace of the power that implies the man"—Pound's further lines imply the conditions of labor and ethos respectively that must be undertaken by poet and possessed by reader before any bridging of eras or experiences may occur. To conceive of Pound's poem less as a ready-made collection of sounds than as an instrument or acoustic space with the capacity to be, by certain readers, sounded, our definition of the "character" required must necessarily expand exponentially. These lines suggest that reading Pound's *Cantos*, for all its fricatives and plosives and distinguishing metrical emphases, can never be just a matter of feeling compelled to produce (internally or out loud) sequences of speech sounds that may enliven or make material one's experience of the poem. The poem, after all, also includes passages like this one from Canto XVII:

A boat came,  
One man holding her sail,  
Guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying:  
" There, in the forest of marble,  
" the stone trees — out of water —  
" the arbours of stone —  
" marble leaf, over leaf,  
" silver, steel over steel,

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<sup>196</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 60. These too are loosely translated and may merge Pauthier's text with other knowledge of Kung Pound had collected over the years. For more details and specific references, see Carroll Terrell's prodigious notes on this moment in his *Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 64.

“ silver beaks rising and crossing,  
 “ prow set against prow,  
 “ stone, ply over ply,  
 “ the gilt beams flare of an evening”<sup>197</sup>

What are the imagined acoustics here? Does a reader hear merely the narrating voice of a man? Is his voice interrupted by the effort of holding a sail and rowing or guiding simultaneously? What is the age of this voice? Its accent? What, realistically, *would* we hear? If we could hear the voice of this man, would we not also hear the sound of oar in water? Are those blanks on the page—bounded on either side by opening quotation marks and the transcription of words uttered—sonically unfreighted? So often, in poetic analysis, blanks and breaks are read in terms of silence. There is the sound of words (which may, as Ingham emphasizes, be perceived as the sound of a voice) contrasted with the absence of words, the latter of which is often taken to be also an absence of sound. But to read this passage in this way would be to amputate it from the broader acoustic environment it both describes and implies. It would be to assume, moreover, that its particular use of quotation marks, which differentiates it from every other use of such marks in the *Cantos*, is purely incidental, a quirk of the moment.

As it happens, though Pound left behind extensive drafts and proofs of all his cantos, his drafts of this section of Canto XVII show it to have been considerably more reworked than any other. What starts out as simply embedded speech interrupted by line breaks and hyphens, becomes, over the course of multiple revisions, an insistence on the spokenness of the man’s words and on the pacing of his delivery. In his earliest draft, written out in his handwriting, Pound indicates regular breaks in the man’s speech by small hyphen marks:

To which a boat came –  
                   one man holding the sails  
 and saying:  
                   in the wood of marble  
 the stone tress – out of water  
 the arbours of stone – marble leaf over leaf  
 silver steel over steel –  
                   prow set against prow  
 stone ply over ply  
 the gilt beams flare of an evening.<sup>198</sup>

He then progresses in his first typed version to a combination of long dashes and staggered lines, setting off the man’s speech with a line break:

To which a boat came,  
                   one man holding her sail,  
 guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying:

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<sup>197</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 77.

<sup>198</sup> Autograph of page “4” from Canto XVII by Pound, YCAL 43, Box 71, Folder 3175, Beinecke.

there in the forest of marble  
     the stone trees — out of water —  
 the arbours of stone —  
                                           marble leaf over leaf,  
 silver steel over steel,  
                                   prow set against prow,  
 stone, ply over ply,  
 the gilt beams flare of an evening.<sup>199</sup>

A third draft then introduces the repeated quotation mark, merging three methods for indicating labored (or interrupted) speech: displaced lines, long dashes, and blank spaces between indications of speaking intent (the quotation mark) and speech itself:

A boat came,  
 One man holding her sail,  
 Guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying:  
 “There, in the forest of marble  
 “    the stone trees — out of water —  
 “    the arbours of stone —  
                                           marble leaf over leaf,  
 “    silver, steel over steel,  
                                   prow set against prow,  
 “    stone, ply over ply,  
     the gilt beams flare of an evening.       ”<sup>200</sup>

The final version, then, which regularizes both the appearance of the quotation mark and the blank space that separates it from the speech it seeks to activate, is the result of Pound’s substantial grappling over how best to represent this moment. It is clearly not just another instance of quoted speech, but we have no way of know with any certainty what other wealth of sounds it is endeavoring to make present. We might, for instance, treat each quotation mark as marking out not merely speech, but also the stroke of an oar into water. We might imagine being rowed ourselves past great monuments of stone and think of how our guide’s voice might reverberate off their surfaces. We might research the references abundant before and after this passage, which suggest that the “forest of marble” refers to the Tempio Malatestiano, an unfinished cathedral church in Rimini, Italy, once the architectural vision and wished for mausoleum of fifteenth-century nobleman Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, whom Pound alternately champions and mystifies throughout the *Cantos* for his patronage of the arts.<sup>201</sup> We might therefore imagine this cathedral in particular, but as if it were a forest that could be rowed through, and so hear the stroke of the oar, the voice of the guide, within a vast, arched, frescoed space, at once contained and echoing. And in all these readings,

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<sup>199</sup> Typescript of page “4” from Canto XVII by Pound, YCAL 43, Box 71, Folder 3176, Beinecke.

<sup>200</sup> Typescript of page “3” from Canto XVII by Pound, YCAL 43, Box 71, Folder 3177, Beinecke.

<sup>201</sup> Terrell, for this passage, refers readers to Pound’s review of Adrian Stokes’s *Stones of Rimini*, a piece of architectural writing in which Stokes describes the qualities of the Tempio, which Pound himself has visited. Pound particularly admires Stokes’s reflections on the qualities of “Water and Stone” in his descriptions of the building.

still, we would be guessing, though Pound, holding space for Dolmetsch-like encounters, might prefer us simply to know and never to have to guess at all.

Perhaps the most powerful, or at least most distinct, example of Pound's expectations for readerly hearing comes courtesy of Canto LXXV, which spans two pages and is comprised almost entirely of a musical score. The score, written out delicately in Rudge's hand, is a violin transcription by Gerhart Münch of Francesco da Milano's sixteenth-century lute transcription of Clement Janequin's "Chant des Oiseaux" ("Song of Birds")—a choral arrangement itself likely based on a Provençal tune, which may in turn have been based on actual bird song. The score is prefaced only by a few lines from Pound, which frame Münch as having emerged from the river of fire in Hades (Phlegethon) bearing the influences of other composers (Dietrich Buxtehude, Hans Sachs) and anthropologists (Ludwig Klages)<sup>202</sup>:

Out of Phlegethon!  
out of Phlegethon,  
Gerhart  
art thou come forth out of Phlegethon?  
with Buxtehude and Klages in your satchel, with the  
Ständebuch of Sachs in yr/ luggage  
—not of one bird but of many<sup>203</sup>

The line "not of one bird but of many" may read at first just as a play on the title of the piece; Münch, with his assorted knowledges and trainings, is a product not just of one "bird" but of many, but we know from Pound's other writings that his sense of what this canto should produce is extraordinarily specific. "Clement Janequin wrote a chorus," he writes in 1934's *ABC of Reading*,

with sounds for the singers of the different parts of the chorus. These sounds would have no literary or poetic value if you took the music away, but when Francesco da Milano reduced it for the lute, the birds were still in the music. And when Münch transcribed it for modern instruments the birds were still there. They ARE still there in the violin part.<sup>204</sup>

For Pound, the pages of Münch's transcription are a testament to the systematic preservation of a very particular sound—the sound of birds singing—*against* the potentially corrosive nature of successive transcription. Here, rhythmic and harmonic similarity seem to triumph over timbral shifts (birds to voice to lute to violin), and what's valuable about this piece of music to Pound seems to reside not in the specific sounds of its contemporary production, but in the exhilarating fact of its ability still to imply the sounds by which it was first inspired. Writing about the same transcription again in 1938, Pound describes it as "belong[ing] to no man" on account of its having demonstrated Janequin's birds to be "indestructible." In fact, he wagers, they are even more indestructible and more "indisputable" on account of their having been captured in music because "no calamity to a

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<sup>202</sup> See Terrell, *Companion*, 388-389 for more details on each of these figures.

<sup>203</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 470-71.

<sup>204</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 54.

single exemplar can obliterate their statement.”<sup>205</sup> Yet in speaking about the existence of other transcriptions, Pound also acknowledges how different they can seem, and how it is Münch’s transcription in particular, along with Rudge’s performance and opinion of it, that most suggests birds to him. Of Münch’s transcription he admits, “[T]here was something I did not hear when I heard the song done by chorus.” And a moment later, he reveals that the effect of the piece comes not just from a basic evocation of birdsong, but of the particular sense it gives him of a plurality of birds in song: “The point is ‘not one bird but a lot of birds’ as our violinist [Rudge] said on first playing it.”<sup>206</sup>

In these ways Pound implies, though entirely without meaning to, that he is responding in part to timbre after all—that a work originally composed for human voices becomes more vivid for him when performed on violin—and I can imagine a number of reasons why this might be the case. In choral versions of the piece, the lyrics first set a scene for hearing birds and then there is a section of purely onomatopoeic singing in which the singers take on the role of the birds themselves. They do this primarily by singing many rapid, harmonically interwoven, cleanly articulated syllables—written in part as variations on “*ty, ty, pyty*”—and interspersed with sung trills (imitating the fluttering oscillations commonly associated with birdsong). In Münch’s transcription, however, this onomatopoeic section, rather than strictly replicating the notes of the choral lines, makes use of violinistic techniques and sonic potentials that are unavailable to or less precisely and rapidly replicated by human voices in song. Not only does Münch’s score call for the violinist to play multiple notes at once, creating the effect of many birds singing together, and to execute a series of trills as well, but it relies additionally on extended techniques like having the violinist pluck an open string while simultaneously bowing high short notes, creating significant timbral contrasts that may, to a listener, seem especially evocative of natural sounds. Notes played via open strings on a violin, particularly the A and E strings, are brighter and clearer in timbre than notes requiring a violinist to stop a string with a finger, and Münch makes extensive use of this contrasts in purely bowed sections as well. Finally, those with even a little training in reading musical scores may notice how many different kinds of markings sit atop Münch’s notes and how many contrasting specifications of volume sit below, each one bidding the performer to produce at times especially dynamic variations in volume, intensity, and articulation. For Pound, whose sensitivity to timbre I’ve already emphasized, these details would likely have seemed both visceral and compelling.

If we were to attempt to inhabit some of awe Pound describes in response to these pages, we might consider Münch’s transcription to function primarily as a blueprint for an acoustic space in which the sound of each extant transcription overlays, and is coterminous with, the sounds of its antecedents and predecessors. We might seek to hear not only the calls of birds as rendered by the violin part before us (presuming we can read Münch’s music and subsequently either perform or imagine the sound of a violin playing it), but to trace them back through layers of musical intervention to the sound of birds proper, to the sound of Janequin’s birds in particular, and to revel in this long view. We might understand these pages as spanning five centuries of history and geography and derive from them a kind of belief in the preservational power of sound and, consequently, of human documentation. And this is one way of reading Pound’s poetry. To, knowing the impact of sonic experience on its author, mine each moment for whatever trace of sound it might imply, to treat word sounds as conduits to a place of listening wherein we may

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<sup>205</sup> Pound, “Janequin, Francesco da Milano,” *The Townsman*, 18.

<sup>206</sup> Pound, “Janequin,” 18.

imagine, should we wish to, the whole of history finding us and coming alive. But if Pound's *Cantos* is an instrument, an amphitheater through and in which history might be, for a reader, sounded—if it is meant to enable, as Pound elsewhere implies, the soundings that make history both real and true<sup>207</sup>—Pound, orchestrator, can only spectate.

A text, in the end, is not a timbre. Though it may encourage the imagination and production of timbres, and of many other elements of sound besides, it can do so with no mastering specificity. As much as Pound knew this to be true within his lifetime, it was never something—perhaps given the great faith he had placed in poetry—he could bear for very long to believe.

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<sup>207</sup>The first edition dust jacket of *Section: Rock-Drill* (comprising Cantos LXXXV-XCV of Pound's *Cantos*) offers the following proclamation, almost definitely written by Pound: "The lies of history must be exposed... The truth must be hammered home by reiteration, with the insistence of a rock drill 'Drilling it into their heads...much in the way that a composer does in music.'"

#### IV. IMAGINATION

Modesty is in order, God knows—facing the universe of sound.

*William Carlos Williams to Stanley Koehler*  
from a letter dated April 1962  
for *The Paris Review*

In April 1962, a year before his death, William Carlos Williams sat down for a series of talks with Stanley Koehler of *The Paris Review*. As Koehler would later describe in his introduction to the published transcript, the poet was in poor health. Beginning in the late 1940s, Williams had suffered a series of heart attacks, strokes, and other illnesses (including an especially serious stroke in 1952) that had affected his ability to move and speak and left him incapable even of using a typewriter. “[T]here would often be a delay before he appeared,” Koehler observed, “pushing out the aluminum storm door and retreating a step or two, extending welcome with a kind of hesitant warmth. On the occasion of the interview, he moved more deliberately than ever, but his greeting was still at pains to be personal.”<sup>208</sup> The interview itself proceeded informally, determined by whichever subjects and trains of thought to which Williams could manage responses, sometimes with the aid of his wife, Florence. Of the transcript, Koehler notes, “The effort it took the poet to find and pronounce words can hardly be indicated here. Many of the sentences ended in no more than a wave of the hand.” Even so, Koehler found himself posing key questions about Williams’s poetry and about Williams’s most deeply held convictions concerning American speech and meter, all of which Williams strove to receive and answer with sincerity.

Williams, Koehler knew, had become especially focused on two concepts: “idiom,” those “movements of speech” capable of distinguishing one language (or one embodiment of a language) from another, and the “variable foot,” an approach to meter (or, in Williams’s terminology, “measure”) that, in its purported ability to capture a poet’s manner of speaking, could evince form and freedom simultaneously. Early in the interview, Williams raises both concepts himself, saying to Koehler, “The thing that concerns me is the theory of what I was determined to do with measure, what you encounter on the page. It must be transcribed to the page from the lips of the poet, as it was with such a master as Sappho.” He then takes up a copy of his poem “The Descent” in an effort to illustrate his point. This poem, which begins Williams’s 1954 collection, *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, is also, as Williams explains, the first poem he considers to be a proper realization of his variable foot experiments. Its first stanza, in published form, appears as follows:

The descent beckons  
as the ascent beckoned.  
Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment,  
a sort of renewal  
even  
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places

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<sup>208</sup> Williams and Koehler, “The Art of Poetry No. 6: William Carlos Williams,” *The Paris Review*.

inhabited by hordes  
heretofore unrealized,  
of new kinds—  
since their movements  
are toward new objectives  
(even though formerly they were abandoned).<sup>209</sup>

Reading (or, per Koehler, “trying to read”) from this opening, Williams breaks off after the first three lines: “The descent beckons / as the ascent beckoned. / Memory is a kind...” Koehler has to step in and complete the phrase—“...of accomplishment”—before Williams can go on: “A sort of renewal / even / an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places.”<sup>210</sup> Having stopped here, Williams at first allows himself to revel in what he feels his meter and line breaks accomplish. “You see how I run that line?” he marvels, “I was very much excited when I wrote this.” In the very next instant, however, he admits to feeling disappointed by his on-the-spot performance. “I was attempting to imitate myself,” he says—adding, as an aside, “I think I can’t even see it at all”—“but it didn’t come alive to me.” Koehler, seeking to offer some reassurance, responds, “It seems to me you were reading it just now,” but Williams can’t be placated. “Something went wrong with me,” he reflects. “I can’t make it out anymore. I can’t type.”

The line Williams admires, which begins with “initiation,” does indeed represent a daring departure from the earlier contents of his oeuvre. Though he had rebuffed the use of traditional forms and meters for quite some time (only his earliest works make use of effects like iambic patterning and rhyme, both of which he would come deride), his tendency before “The Descent” had still been to pen lines that were fairly similar in length or reflective in proportion, at least within the context of a single poem. For Williams to move from a line containing just two syllables, “even,” to a line containing seventeen, he needed to develop and embrace an entirely new sense of how such lines could function both in relation to one another and as an expression of his own speaking and hearing. In this case, the long line is meant to bring the reader into visceral contact with the poet’s speech, which, despite the poem’s overall suggestion of regularity (its three-line groupings marked by successive indents), Williams wanted to capture as idiosyncratic and therefore real. It was in fact the sensation of contrast between a general awareness and experience of pattern and a constant reckoning with the variability of the lines themselves that Williams hoped would leave readers mindful of language as simultaneously shared and differentiating. Though he only adopted the form characterized by “The Descent” toward the end of his life, he felt certain it brought him nearer to the purpose for art-making he had for decades described. “Being an artist,” he wrote in 1939,

I can produce, if I am able, universals of general applicability. If I succeed in keeping myself objective enough, sensual enough, I can produce the factors, the concretions of materials by which others shall understand and so be led to see—that they may the better see, touch, taste, enjoy—their own world *differing as it may* from mine. By mine, they, different, can be discovered to be the same as I, and, thrown into contrast, will see the implications of a general enjoyment through me.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Williams, “The Descent,” *Collected Poems, Volume II*, 245.

<sup>210</sup> Williams and Koehler, “The Art of Poetry No. 6.”

<sup>211</sup> Williams, “Against the Weather,” *Selected Essays*, 197-98.

This, I might say, is Williams's grand theory of consonance; like E.M. Forster's narrator calling Beethoven's Fifth "sublime noise," there is something supremely powerful to Williams about experiences of similarity that, in revealing the possibility for interconnectedness, may further serve as portals onto the exploration and interrogation of difference. But in elevating and seeking to work within the parameters of his theory, Williams assumed that he (the poet, the artist) would remain the same with respect to himself. He nowhere plans for the possibility of finding his own writing dissimilar, of being unable to remember, to hear, or to perform his words according to the rhythms he feels he has made immutable through line and measure. Koehler's interview, coming at a moment when Williams can no longer produce speech that reliably represents, to his ear, either the speech he imagines for himself or his speech as he can best recall it, forces him repeatedly to confront the widening gap between his most cherished ideas and their execution.

Following Williams's reading of the "The Descent," Koehler prompts him to admit that his lines, despite being written to reflect his "nervous habit of speech—in which things come more or less in a rush," contain pauses when Williams reads them that don't appear in the text. "Then what is the integrity of the line?" Koehler asks, urging Williams to reflect on his lack of consistency. Pressed in this way, Williams can't quite decide whether to find fault with his stroke-ravaged body or with the compositional methods he has come to prize. "If I was consistent in myself," he starts, "it would be very much more effective than it is now. I would have followed much closer to the indicated divisions of the line than I did. It's too haphazard."<sup>212</sup> It's his body that has gotten in the way, his "damaged brain," as he goes on to put it, that prevents him from successfully excavating his own speech from within his poetry. But as the conversation wears on, Williams alternately concludes that perhaps he fell short somewhere in his writing process, that he did not do a good enough job of counting and making things "exact," and that this perhaps is to blame for some of the discrepancies in his readings. "You think it should be more exact than, than you have made it," Koehler summarizes, referring Williams to additional lines from his later poems. "Yes," Williams replies, "it should be more exact, in Milton's sense. Milton counted the syllables." Pressing still further, Koehler prompts Williams to recall the final lines of his long poem, "The Desert Music."

This poem, with its first-person speaker (Williams), additional voices, and highly unstable form—dialogue broken at times into short, at times into long stanzas with lines of differing number and indentation, passages of narration shaped into offset, unrhymed quatrains, prose-like interjections framing poems within the poem, periods occasionally placed with large blanks on either side—may be read in part as Williams's way of working out, through poetry, his greatest hopes for and anxieties about the medium. Written for an oral performance at Harvard's Sanders Theater in 1951, in the wake of Williams's first stroke and on the occasion of his being named poet of the year by the Alpha chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa society, it follows its speaker and a few companions over the course of a nighttime outing "between Juárez and El Paso" as the speaker reflects recurrently on how to "get said what must be said."<sup>213</sup> The "music" of the poem's title merges, variously, with the rhythms perceived in the physical movements of the group as they navigate their evening in search of a drink; the human voices they encounter, from speech across several languages to the calls of vendors hawking their wares, the laughter of teens to the whispers of the elderly; the literal music spilling out of and contained within the bars they enter, both instrumental and sung; and the many

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<sup>212</sup> Williams and Koehler, "The Art of Poetry No. 6."

<sup>213</sup> Williams, *Collected Poems, Volume II*, 273-4.

other sounds the speaker remembers from over the longer course of his lifetime, all of which at times seem inextricable from the landscapes, the colors, the textures that call them to mind. It even (the music) becomes a protective force, contouring the speaker's perception of an otherwise shapeless, limbless lump that may or may not be human, may or may not be dead, and that the other inhabitants of the poem pass in fear and awe. Consequently, the poem also comprises what Peter Middleton calls Williams's "most sustained meditation on the situation of poetry as sound in the modern world."<sup>214</sup> Barreling in its closing moments toward and past the declaration "I *am* a poet! I / am. I am. I am a poet," of which the speaker feels both proud and "ashamed," it registers one final "lonely" moment of listening before ending with this quatrain:

And I could not help thinking  
of the wonders of the brain that  
hears that music and of our  
skill sometimes to record it.<sup>215</sup>

"Do you still feel that such modesty is in order?" Koehler asks of Williams. To which Williams replies, "Modesty is in order, God knows—facing the universe of sound."<sup>216</sup>

## Modesty

Since beginning this project in 2013, I have returned to Koehler's interview transcript numerous times. At first it was simply the source of a poignant anecdote, a way of demonstrating, through a discussion of Williams's struggle to read his own lines, how quickly a theory of poetic sound can erode when brought into contact with the material and indomitable reality of a body's inevitable changes. I wanted to hold it in contrast to Pound's willful, wishful declarations about rhythm and notation, and to his impatience with poets and readers whose hearing experiences he at once presumed to know and could not imagine. I wanted to use it to introduce the extent to which willful declaration and impatient dismissal were traits Williams also, for much of his life, shared, and to let it help me tease out how Williams and Pound, for all their similarities, differed. In "Belly Music," one of his earlier essays about poetry, for instance, Williams takes on would-be critics of his prolificacy and vociferousness by mounting this defense of the potency of his work:

[I]f my voice is cracked at least no one can HEAR singing as I can nor put it into the throat so perfectly. Whose throat is yours and which is mine if not the one into which I PUT the music. And I will fight to insist that I am not voiceless. I insist that it is I, I, I who PUTS the music into the throats of those in whom I HEAR my music.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Peter Middleton, "The Voices in 'The Desert Music,'" 169.

<sup>215</sup> Williams, *Collected Poems, Volume II*, 284.

<sup>216</sup> Williams and Koehler, "The Art of Poetry No. 6."

<sup>217</sup> Williams, "Belly Music," *Others*, 28.

Not only do these statements bear the tenor of Pound's most vehement diatribes (so too does the whole article from which they are taken), but Williams goes a step further by insisting both that his writing may be heard exactly as he intends it to be *and* that it in fact enacts a closed loop of performance and influence—that he is not only the sole person capable of a certain degree of hearing but also the sole means by which the “music” he hears may be recorded, repeated, re-voiced. The “music” (or “singing”) both precedes and succeeds him; it exists perhaps innately or organically to be heard, but it only becomes available for conscious performance by others on account of his particular abilities to hear and to intervene. He is directly and forcibly responsible, in this way, for its amplification and dissemination.

Williams, unlike Pound, was never conflicted about the capacities of his ear, never self-conscious about his sense of pitch or ability to perform music. As he relates on the very first page of his *Autobiography*, he was beating on drums with such “accuracy” as a toddler that it became a part of his family’s lore—“Bam bam! They say my time was perfect.”<sup>218</sup> As a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, he befriended a young pianist through the walls of his dorm room by picking up his violin and responding spontaneously to the other man’s playing (as it happened, this was also the encounter that would lead to his first meeting with Pound), and though he wrote realistically about his lack of development on the instrument (calling it “patient if unsuccessful plodding”), he also had a decently trained singing voice, which got him selected into the university’s musical comedy troupe and cast for roles in local productions.<sup>219</sup> Like Pound, Williams had his share of personally affecting sonic experiences, and like Pound, he often found them to be the result of literal encounters with music and music performance. But there is in Williams much less of the sense one gets in Pound of having to justify, define, or preemptively defend—whether through references to supplementary research or to the opinions of perceived master figures—the use of music as a central and centering term for poetry. One of Williams’s more striking encounters with musical sound features as a brief recollection toward the end of “The Desert Music” as the speaker and his companions retrace their steps to head home:

What’s that?

Oh, come on.

But what’s THAT?

the music! The

*music!* as when Casals struck  
and held a deep cello tone  
and I am speechless .<sup>220</sup>

In this moment, Williams as first-person speaker hears, as he has been hearing throughout the evening of the poem, something that calls him to the purpose of poetry. Its effect is so impressive, so all-encompassing, that he cannot help but exclaim and remark upon it. And though the “music”

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<sup>218</sup> Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, 3.

<sup>219</sup> See “Preface,” *Selected Essays*, i, for Williams’s story of first meeting Pound and his account of his own violin playing. See Williams, *Autobiography*, 52 for his description of his musical performances.

<sup>220</sup> Williams, *Collected Poems, Volume II*, 283-4

referred to in these lines, as often elsewhere in the poem, appears to be mostly metaphorical, Williams compares its effect to that of a very specific moment of musical sound-making. “Casals,” in this case, is Pablo Casals, perhaps the most renowned cellist of the first half of the twentieth century and one of the most greatly admired of all time. As Williams writes in the “Foreword” of his *Autobiography*, he would go to see Casals in the company of Alfred Stieglitz and come home afterward in a mood to think and write, to “try to discover,” he says, “how my mind had readjusted itself to its contacts.”<sup>221</sup> By invoking in his poem just the instance of a single low tone “struck and held” by an extraordinarily skilled player, Williams narrows the experience of music down to a singularly arresting sonic effect, an emergence of sound whose attracting force is so great as to actively prevent other sounds in response (“I am speechless”).

This is a level of particularity Pound experienced but could not precisely, through the terms of music, describe. Williams’s knowledge and background as a performer, as one who actually played and sang, gave him confidence in the donning of musical metaphor and analogy, and in his flush association of himself and of his poems with the acute potentials he ascribed to sounds heard in the context of music. “I’ll sing when the veins below my belly are clotted solid,” he declares, giving “Belly Music” its title. “I am I and I am a song and that is all I am.”<sup>222</sup> At the same time, and even within the same essay, Williams’s vocation as a doctor and elite training in science (which followed upon an elite private high school education) left him sensitive to the potential inconsistencies, the exaggerations in his writing. The exasperation that marks Williams’s letters to Pound during the latter’s confinement at St. Elizabeths was cousin to the exasperation he often felt toward the field of poetry at large, which seemed to traffic at times in Poundian “posturings as the poet” to the exclusion and devaluation of the “humility and caution of the scientist.”<sup>223</sup> Williams, rather unlike Pound (unless one counts Pound’s “Dissertation”), ends “Belly Music” with the following disclaimer:

I MUST demand what I do. I must fight back at the stupidity around me. I acknowledge inadequacy of information, elliptical statement, too vague generalizations SOMETIMES. I am not always a fair critic. I am a man doing that which does not fit his turn of mind. I think it important to state these things. A more able scholar, a cooler brain with a wider fund of information more acutely focused—since these things are unenlisted in the important matters which concern me I write to fill the gap, to emphasize a need which I don’t know better how to make apparent.<sup>224</sup>

His argument here is that there is no research protocol for poetry—no way to be a “more able scholar,” to apply to the theorization of lines and meters a more complete and objective pool of data, or to the act of writing poetry itself a more finely-honed complement of descriptive tools. His argument, moreover, is that the absence of such protocol is not merely factual but also desired and actively perpetuated by his contemporaries who have not sought to correct it. He is using, it is implied, the meagre terms and methods available to him to share his thoughts in the way he hopes

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<sup>221</sup> Williams, “Foreword,” *Autobiography*, xiii.

<sup>222</sup> Williams, “Belly Music,” 28.

<sup>223</sup> Williams, *Autobiography*, 58.

<sup>224</sup> Williams, “Belly Music,” 32.

they'll best be understood, and if the consequence is a perceived lack of neatness or responsibility, this seems to him par for the course.

Still, unlike Pound, who read shallowly but voraciously, with a breadth and pace matched by few (if any) of his peers, Williams strove increasingly over the course of his lifetime to do what concentrated, methodical research he could—to try to isolate those aspects of poetry he believed could be held accountable for the greatest part of its impact, and to develop compositional approaches that were directly reflective of the information he had gathered. If his earlier years are marked by reactive, self-consciously under-resourced bluster, his later writings and correspondences reflect his attempts to draw on the principles of hypothesis and experimentation, on collaboration and external review, as a crucial counterbalance. This was not something I understood about Williams at the start. It was only after venturing deep into his Beinecke archive, a year and a half after I first completed my dissertation prospectus, that I developed a sense of how seriously he came to approach both his own edification and the task of edifying others. In 1949, he gave a lecture at Bard College entitled “Some Hints Toward the Enjoyment of Modern Verse” in which he sought to stress the relationship between understanding poetry at the level of its fundamental structure and being able to enjoy it. For modern poetry especially, he wished to draw his audience’s attention to “why it is, why it came about and what it seeks to do,” and to develop their experience of pleasure by increasing their knowledge of “motives and means” rather than leaving them to sole dependence on the “sensual satisfactions of lovely lines.”<sup>225</sup> Defining “poem” throughout as “a small machine made of words (blocks) and the spaces (mortar) between them,” he goes on to channel Pound in designating “time” as “the element most to be considered: a measured sequence” and in emphasizing that “a word as used in a poem, or anywhere else for that matter, has two qualities—it has a meaning but it is also a sound. In making the structure of a poem its sound is primary.”<sup>226</sup> Also like Pound, though with less recourse to allusion and less dramatic flair, he connects the project of poetry to the realization of historical truths and to the positive transformation of the present moment through the conduit of human imagination:

Our dreams are escapes from an oppressive reality—but dreams may be dominated and put to great service for the individual and the race by the poet, by structural imagination and skill—to astonishing effect in the world as the evidence of history proves. Poems, so constructed, have been again, as I have said, sometimes the only connection we have with the *reality* of the past.<sup>227</sup>

More than Pound, however, he tries to elucidate the perceptual development he seeks to engender from a place of empathy about its inherent complexities. The language of training and of pedagogy is everywhere in his later work, as is the expectation that its effects may only be noticeable over a long period of time.

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<sup>225</sup> Though this writing appears in print (*Contemporary Poetry: A Retrospective from the Quarterly Review of Literature*, 124-28), I am quoting directly from Williams’s corrected archival draft, which show some revisions (including at the level of capitalization and punctuation) that do not make it into the published version. See typescript of “Some Hints Toward the Enjoyment of Modern Verse” by Williams, 1949, YCAL MSS 116, Box 62, Folder 1328, Huntington, 1.

<sup>226</sup> Williams, “Some Hints,” 4.

<sup>227</sup> Williams, “Some Hints,” 3.

Undated in the archives, unmentioned (to my knowledge) elsewhere in scholarship, but traceable to this same period (on account of its inclusion of a selection from Louis Zukofsky's *Anew*, first published in 1946), is Williams's "Short Anthology for Teaching Metrical Construction"—a selection of poems meant to guide readers systematically through different approaches to the poetic line. On the title page of a draft archived at the Beinecke, Williams has scribbled the following by way of introduction:

Disassociate your mind from habitual acceptances—and let the poem come to you—receptively: let it strike against your ears in its disassociations. Part of its burden is to break up your fixations that torment you. Listen, in other words, expecting in writing and reading to be taken by surprise. You may be surprised.<sup>228</sup>

We might detect, in these lines, a precursor to Charles Bernstein's "reading workshop" exhortations, his appeal to students to "consider the implausible, to try out alternative ways of thinking, to listen to the way language sounds before trying to figure out what it means." Williams, more precisely than Bernstein, however—and more precisely than Pound in his appeal just to "LISTEN"—prepares and orients his would-be pupils toward the sensation of difference and toward sensitivity to the subtlety with which each poem alternately triggers and denies their experience of sensory consonance from word to word, line to line. Subsequently, Williams put together a series of essays entitled "Measure: A Study of That Which has Occurred in the Development of the Poetical Line in Modern Times." Datable in part to 1958 (given Williams's exchanges about it with Hugh Kenner), it reflects the sum total of Williams's scholarly exploits up until that point.<sup>229</sup> Through frank discussions and metrical analyses of the work of English Renaissance figures (including composer Thomas Campion, poet George Chapman, and Shakespeare), as well as investigations into the science of linguistics<sup>230</sup> and dissections of modern American idiomatic expression, he aims to offer clear accounts of the systems of training and exposure that (to his mind) have flattened or otherwise limited the perception of nuance in speech and writing. In this way he hopes to serve, as he ultimately puts it, "the possible interest of living poets...to have or to search to have a relation to the thoughts and speech of a living world, their own."<sup>231</sup> Beginning also in 1958 and continuing on through the year of Koehler's interview, Williams then tested his pedagogical methods by writing encouragingly and profusely to a young poet and scholar by the name of Mary Ellen Solt. Solt began their correspondence by sending him a paper she'd written on his work and that she planned to turn into a dissertation; galvanized by his response, she went on to analyze his poems rigorously according to the terms and structures he specified, to send him meticulous reports on her findings, and to share with him her own extensive research into English and American prosody, linguistics, and phonetics. In many ways, she was the most dominant intellectual companion of his final years, wholly convinced his ideas constituted

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<sup>228</sup> Typescript of "Short Anthology for Teaching Metrical Construction" by Williams, YCAL MSS 116, Box 45, Folder 1121, Huntington, 1.

<sup>229</sup> The essays themselves went unpublished until 1999, when they were quietly included in Hugh Witemeyer's edited collection of letters between Williams and Charles Tomlinson (see bibliography).

<sup>230</sup> He devotes a chapter to nineteenth century poet and scholar Sidney Lanier's treatise on prosody, *The Science of English Poetry*, which on account of its disappointment to him, helps him frame his discussions of idiom and measure.

<sup>231</sup> Though this text is available in print, as I note above, I quote here from the archived document. Typescript of "Measure: A Study of That Which has Occurred in the Development of the Poetical Line in Modern Times" by Williams, [1958], YCAL MSS 116, Box 43, Folder 1083, Huntington, 3.

crucial discoveries and capable of enthusiastically reflecting back to him the potentials and subtleties of his poetic vision.<sup>232</sup>

These details and so many more have gradually reshaped my reading of Koehler's interview transcript as well as my sense of its value to my work. These days, the transcript interests me far less for what it destabilizes within Williams's theories or challenges about his compositional methods (though of course it does both of these things) than for the particular light it sheds on the challenges of conversing about hearing with respect to poetry. Koehler, focused on procuring compelling final insights into Williams's practice, does his utmost to pin Williams down on matters of notational accuracy and, consequently for Williams, poetic efficacy. In the process he relays to Williams only the barest sense of what he, Koehler, hears (pauses, deviations from printed line breaks) and cites Williams's past remarks as defining statements against which the events of the present moment may be tested. But at no point does he ask Williams how or what the poet is hearing now, in what ways he feels limited, in what ways he might wish for difference. When Williams says he's failed in the moment to make his "Descent" lines "come alive," Koehler's response is only to confirm that he did in fact hear Williams reading. He does not attempt to investigate the condition of aliveness for Williams beyond a basic accounting of the presence or absence of speed, of delay. He does not attempt to reflect back any other aspects of what he is hearing, though surely there must have been as many dimensions to the sound of Williams's voice on that day, in that moment, as may be attributed to any voice at any moment of reading aloud. And though Williams repeatedly mentions his awareness of the changes to his mind and body, as well as the forms of uncertainty these changes have cast on his ability to access his own work, Koehler—perhaps in an effort to be sensitive and not overstep—speaks to Williams as if nothing has changed for the poet at all. Perhaps this was the right approach; having not been present in the room, having not known either Williams or Koehler during their lifetimes, I do not know what would have felt most like empathy to Williams concerning his physical condition. But one consequence of how their conversation did proceed is an interview transcript that, while seeming at times to consist entirely of a discussion of poetry as a "record"<sup>233</sup> of sound, contends hardly at all with the physical conditions of sound perception and sound-making, revealing very little, finally, of what was spoken and what was heard.

Instead, Koehler parts from Williams with a feeling of things left unresolved, and in his introduction to the transcript he gives voice to this feeling:

The question whether one had not to assume a fixed element in the foot as the basis for meter drew only a typical Williams negative, slightly profane, and no effort was made to pursue this much further. As a result, the notion of some mysterious 'measure' runs through the interview like an unlaidd ghost, promising enough pattern for shapeliness, enough flexibility for all the subtleties of idiom. No wonder a copy of

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<sup>232</sup> For more on this correspondence, I'd simply refer the reader to the original letters and drafts sent from Solt to Williams from 1958 to 1962 and archived in full at the Beinecke (YCAL MSS 116, Box 22, Folder 690). These were my sources. Though Williams's letters to Solt are archived separately among Solt's papers at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, Solt's letters are extensive and detailed enough to give a strong impression of Williams's remarks to her in return.

<sup>233</sup> In choosing this term, I just want to recall the final lines of "The Desert Music": "And I could not help thinking / of the wonders of the brain that / hears that music and of our / skill sometimes to record it."

‘The Descent’ was in evidence as we began; for however much one may argue over the theory of this verse, it is hard to resist the performance.<sup>234</sup>

Not only do these comments underscore Koehler’s particular interrogative approach (prompting Williams to make “yes” or “no” statements regarding the source of a poetic line’s integrity), they also emphasize how much Koehler withheld about his experience of Williams’s poetry when speaking with Williams directly. Koehler’s remark about “The Descent”—that “it is hard to resist the performance”—suggests Williams’s reading may have come alive after all, if not for Williams, then at least for Koehler. That Koehler relegates Williams’s theory of verse to a kind of mystery when he personally cannot make its individual terms cohere, gives credence, I think, to Williams’s early point about the field’s resistance to “a wider fund of information.” While it would be unfair of me to suggest Koehler could have approached things differently, I do think that had Koehler been equipped with a slightly different set of questions, with more freedom or inclination to speak intimately rather than purely in critical terms, and had he felt favorably about the possibility of receiving an engaged response, he might have helped us learn much more (to paraphrase Williams himself) about why Williams’s theory was, why it came about, and what it sought to do. At very least, he might have helped us imagine how much more there could be to know.

## Learning to Hear

A bedtime ritual: read Percy Bysshe Shelley to your five-year-old daughter.

Not simply “Ode to the West Wind” or “Ozymandias,” but long selections from *Prometheus Unbound*, chosen at whim, or “Triumph of Life,” esoteric and interrupted. Read by the light of her conch shell nightlight, from an edition so cheap and printed so minutely she cannot hope to follow along. Read without regard for line breaks or meter, without knowledge of certain rhymes, emphasizing only the words you yourself find moving, which may or may not be the subjects and verbs, the grammatical apexes or metrical denouements. If your daughter stays awake, what is the sound in her ears? Is she listening to Earth’s lowing in tones not “like life,” rejoicing to hear what yet she cannot speak? Is she pondering the vowels of your latent Vietnamese slipping into and around her own native tongue, the sentences she thinks she might understand if only you could deliver them differently? Absorbed by the task of excavating syllable from syllable, is it you or Shelley or the English language she discovers, vexed and charged with earnest emotion? Close the volume midpage, abruptly. Switch to Wordsworth.

This is, in part, how I came to poetry. Before kindergarten, Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, Sesame Street—maybe even before nursery rhymes and *Goodnight Moon*—there were the nightly declamations of a South Vietnamese farmer’s boy who believed, above all things, that John Keats had saved his life. He had grown up with a deaf father and a fisherwoman mother, the former of whom, having lost his hearing to a land mine explosion, communicated primarily through words traced on tabletops or in air. He had peddled the day’s catch in the dialects of the marketplace, the seventh of twelve children, and been forced to leave school at the age of ten, his education a casualty of his family’s poverty. He had learned English first from American GIs stationed in Saigon and later, miraculously, from a Kansas high school teacher who, perhaps as surprised by his presence in

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<sup>234</sup> Williams and Koehler, “The Art of Poetry No. 6.”

Wichita as he must have been himself, gave him volumes of British Romanticism to read. One summer she had him write to her daily, however he could, about his literary encounters. For each letter he sent, she wrote him one in reply and returned his pages with grammar corrections.

It was often in composing these letters, which took him hours, that he found himself weeping over a stray line or stanza. How improbable it seemed that these poems, filtered slowly through his dictionary, could offer companionship, solace, wisdom he had never before imagined or known. And for many years after, as his life took him to the shores of the Atlantic and later along the Pacific Coast, he would think of casting himself among the rocks and breakers, only to be turned back by the words of a tubercular young man laid to rest in nineteenth-century Rome. When Keats died, his last request was to be buried beneath a tombstone marked only with this epitaph: “Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.”<sup>235</sup> This my father knew. It was by relentlessly confronting the truths of his own brief existence that my father felt Keats had not only borne such truths but transcended them; so my father, to whom Keats’s outstretched, undead hand became a symbol of human perseverance and potential, willed himself forward into warmth and capacity.<sup>236</sup>

Here is another part: sometime before I was born, my parents vowed never to make me speak any non-English words of consequence. That I be indistinguishable in speech and writing from any child born to native English speakers became, for them, a near-obsession. Though they conversed, fought, murmured to each other almost exclusively in Vietnamese, in a house too small for acoustic separation—though I spent many afternoons mute and uncomprehending as my mother spoke in Cantonese to her own mother for hours—they took a perverse kind of pride in my quarantine; the less I understood of other tongues, the more I seized English as my own. As my father collected British and American “best of” lists through which to curate my library, my mother, a Vietnamese-born Chinese woman who had learned English first from American pop songs and later from a Christian college in Dayton, Tennessee, brought home stacks of English grammar workbooks, vocabulary sheets, and spelling exercises. Under her supervision, I applied myself to spelling and grammar, divorced my long *ays* from my short *ahs*. My weekend mornings grew synonymous with dictations from the *New York Times*, my mother reading haltingly as I scrambled to decipher her accidental distortions.

How much of my relationship to poetry is the sum of these moments? How much X, how much Y? My father calls Prometheus “Pro-*thee*-meus” and *The Prelude* “The Pree-*lewd*.” He preserves stanzas in his memory not as heirlooms, pristine, but as tokens worn daily by greatcoat pocketing. His favorite couplets he declaims with such steadfast fervency that I am in graduate school, taking a course in Romanticism, before I realize whole words are missing. Each fragment he shores against his ruins, though he has not read that poem. Nor has he read a smirking Robert Browning: “Ah, did you once see Shelley plain, / And did he stop and speak to you?”<sup>237</sup>

When I first began this project, I wanted to end it with Wallace Stevens. Stevens, whose poems I loved the most, whose poems I wished to commit to memory. Unlike Pound and unlike Williams, Stevens was a poet who declared little interest in what poetry could either capture or convey about his own speech or hearing. A friend of Williams but not of Pound, contemporaneous to them both, he too highly privileged a hearing relationship between reader and poem. But he was adamant that the chief value attributable to poetry depended neither on a poet’s ability to craft and

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<sup>235</sup> Michelle Stacey, “Writ in Water.”

<sup>236</sup> John Keats, “This living hand, now warm and capable.”

<sup>237</sup> Robert Browning, “Memorabilia”

transmit a differentiated (differentiable) voice nor on a reader's ability to inhabit a poet's sonic experience. Where Pound and Williams attended to what poems could restore or retain about history, where Pound dreamt of an absolute rhythm and Williams strove to reproduce the rhythms of the spaces and languages he inhabited, where each felt spurred by experiences of sound that were transformative because uniquely arresting, Stevens instead theorized poetry's potential to facilitate human survival, to manifest for individual readers a more inhabitable future from among the distresses of the present. In perhaps his best-known essay, 1942's "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens suggests poems materialize through their sounds the force of human imagination, which in turn constitutes our greatest defense against the deadening "pressure" of reality. The sound of words, gleaned through poetry, is also, for Stevens, the sound of the persistently innovating human mind—a mind that refuses to succumb to violence or stagnation—and so the sound of words "helps us to live our lives."<sup>238</sup> A poet's preferences, within this theory of verse, are ultimately irrelevant; the only skill that matters is that of writing poems in such a way as to compel readers to read them and to in reading find some vital reflection of themselves. If for Stevens, just as for Williams, and just as for Pound, "words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds," it matters much less to Stevens *what* readers hear than *that* they hear and feel connected, affirmed. "The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings," he writes,

which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them.<sup>239</sup>

Importantly, the power of the acutest poet, here, is not a power to wholly master sound, but instead to follow, as Stevens said more plainly mid-lecture in 1936, "an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning."<sup>240</sup> It is a rhetoric of balance—neither Williams's thirst for disassociation and surprise nor Pound's making of templates from his own idiosyncrasy will do. Where Williams and Stevens define music in such a way as to make it a beacon toward which poetry might travel, Stevens is happy to let "music" name any element of a poem's sound that gives readers some pleasure and compels them to read on. Stevens's practical limits for poetry, unlike Pound's practical limits for musical sound, concern composing in "whatever form you like" but knowing others are "free to put their hands over their ears." If one is Stevens, one wants to see few hands over ears because the value of poetry depends on its being willingly, searchingly heard. "You are free," he tells his Harvard audience, "but your freedom must be consonant with the freedom of others."

But how does one know if one's freedom is consonant with the freedom of others? How can one be sure that one's experience of consonance is also an experience of freedom? To be among of Stevens's archive at the Huntington, where palatial gardens and vivid flora meet up with the fact that one can only photograph certain materials at certain hours of the day, at special desk, at special request, under special supervision, is to be reminded that both freedom and consonance (in all its

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<sup>238</sup> Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 665.

<sup>239</sup> Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 662-63

<sup>240</sup> Typescript of "The Irrational Element in Poetry" by Stevens, delivered for the Morris Gray Committee at Harvard University 8 December 1936, mssWAS4167, Huntington.

layered definitions) may be felt and bestowed in stages, that each is many-tiered, many-pronged, convoluted thing. Pound and Williams each left behind copious drafts of their poems and essays; their labor to work and rework their thoughts and experiences before ever sharing anything, and even often after, spilled out in their wake, they did not preemptively try to hide it. Stevens's archive, by comparison, is meticulously curated. Of many of his poems, lectures, and essays, only a final typescript has been preserved, indistinguishable from its published counterpart, bearing scant trace even of human handling. As for the rest, if there exists a draft handwritten in pencil, one can sometimes make out layer upon layer of erasure beneath. Stevens would sooner have worn a paper through, it seems, than leave behind evidence of a poem's earlier iterations—of, perhaps, its lesser consonances. This is not to say Stevens did not hold his own opinions or that there was no person of substance behind his literary quest, but these hints he fought immensely to conceal, swearing friends and acquaintances to as much silence as they would offer. To Hi Simons, to whom Stevens once wrote, "I cannot imagine anything more agreeable than to read a competent analysis of one of one's own poems, in a pleasant room, when it is zero out of doors,"<sup>241</sup> he also wrote: "These notes are for your personal use. They are not to be quoted."<sup>242</sup> Upon Stevens's death, Williams wrote four successive drafts of a tribute to his memory, each one awkward and belabored and growing only moreso, though the two had been friends for forty years. "Stevens was not an easy man to approach," he ventures, nearly by way of conclusion, "but the affection that was felt for him by his intimates came from a recognition of his poetic mastery which is the way he would want it to be."<sup>243</sup>

Having seen Stevens's archive, I have found it hard to return to his poetry. Hard to participate in the feelings of connection that once seemed to emerge as if by magic, as if Stevens were speaking to me and not through his training to my training, through the richness life he lived in this world to the richness of my own life, which has given me so many provisions to aid with the work of imagination. It is not that I resent the experience of pleasure, but that I bristle at a pleasure detached from information, detached from a desire to learn more, to learn better. I want the mess of experimentation, of frustration, of failure. I want recognize the mess in poetry, to make its archives visible, teachable, so that we in striving to hear through decades and centuries, across continents, across languages, neither grow too comfortable with any feeling of ease nor come to think that those we seek to hear were not striving and struggling too. So that we may never forget our bodies, which are with us everywhere and contour all we do.

Of the many confessions to be found among Stevens's files, and in full view of all that's never to be found, therefore, my favorite by far is a scrawl in the notebook Wallace Stevens kept between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-five:

I am not at home by the sea; my fancy is not at all marine, so to speak; when I sit on the shore and listen to the waves they only suggest wind in treetops. A single coup d'oeil is enough to see all, as a rule. The sea is loveliest far in the abstract when the imagination can feed upon the idea of it. The thing itself is dirty, wobbly and wet.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Correspondence from Stevens to Hi Simons, 29 December 1939, mssWAS 113, Huntington.

<sup>242</sup> Correspondence from Stevens to Simons, 9 January 1940, mssWAS 53, Huntington.

<sup>243</sup> Typescript of "Wallace Stevens" by Williams, 1955, YCAL MSS 116, Box 45, Folder 1140, Beinecke.

<sup>244</sup> Unpaginated slim journal kept by Stevens dated from 1902-1904, mssWAS, Box 3, Huntington.

Captured in these lines is a young man casually cognizant of his stubborn, idiosyncratic bodily experience, of the way his mind distorts his perception even of what his eyes know to be true. The relationship between imagination and sound here seems one of complete usurpation—whether helped by a foundational revulsion to being shoreside, by a comparatively larger love of wooded terrains, by a general penchant for hyperbole, or by other, less articulable, accumulated encounters, Stevens allows no room even for the possibility of hearing the sea as the sea. And though Stevens at first blames his “fancy” for his overall discomfort with the marine, he goes on to acknowledge the role of physical distance in what he can and cannot imagine. Shielded in body from the wet and the wobbly, given room to ply his thoughts as he pleases, he’s more than ready to entertain “the idea of it.” Confronted with the sea up close and entire, however, his mind instead revolts, swapping one sound for another and emphasizing, in this way, his bodily discomfort.

In truth, Steven’s ears (and the cognitive processes behind them) can hardly be blamed for their confusion. Both the sound of waves crashing and the sound of leaves rustling are forms of white noise. Each alone is comprised of so many disparate, random frequencies, in such equal proportion and power, that no single pitch, structure, or pattern may be said to emerge beyond the distinctively limited variance of the whole. Leaves on tree branches—like waves of water lifting and crashing, rushing and receding from banks of rocks or sand—are at once multitudinous and confined. As such, one can argue that trees and seas in fact produce the same sound, undifferentiable by human ears when encountered in brief samples. It’s hardly an accident that a discrete realization of white noise is termed a “random shock.” There is nothing within it for the human ear to parse or identify beyond the fact of its existence. At the same time, any extended live recording of a forest or cliffside would retain and convey traces of its more specific context, and so too would any live experience of such spaces. After all, the form of white noise produced by the sea resides within a whole host of other sonic effects, not least among them the sea’s patterned ebb and flow, the reliable presence, tapered into absence, of its volume. Listening to waves and hearing wind in treetops, therefore, may begin as a case of spontaneous (and perhaps spontaneously desired, as Stevens implies) association—the mind applying its best guess to a cypher of a sound. But to continue hearing only wind in treetops seems a different matter entirely. This latter state suggests a listener capable of disregarding, whether by will or by ignorance, all hints of a sound’s true origin.

I end with these observations not because they are all I have to say, but because they gesture at all that’s left to be said that I cannot say right now. In the time I’ve spent with Williams’s Koehler interview, the moment I remember most has shifted from Williams’s insistence on modest in the face of sound to this description of how he has tried to speak to those seemed least like him. “Reality. Reality,” he says to Koehler. “My vocabulary was chosen out of the intensity of my concern. When I was talking in front of a group, I wasn’t interested in impressing them with my power of speech, but only with the seriousness of my intentions toward them.”<sup>245</sup> My vocabulary is chosen out of the intensity of my concern, but I have not learned many words yet.

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<sup>245</sup> Williams and Koehler, “The Art of Poetry No. 6.”

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