

A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry

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I - For Starters, a Sub-History

Most sound poets and observers of the contemporary scene approach sound poetry as if it were a purely contemporary phenomenon, but this neoteric view simply does not hold up. It is true that some kinds of sound poetry are new in the sense of being without formal precedent. But just as "concrete" and other recent visual poetries have their analogues going back into folklore or into (for example) the Bucolic Greek poets, so sound poetry too has its close analogues. This is natural, since it is natural for anyone who is interested in poetry to try, at some point, isolating the sounds of poetry from other aspects of it and to try out the making of poems with sounds more-or-less alone; only if such an experiment were totally artificial could something so basic as a poetry of sound alone be entirely without precedent. But, to start our investigation, let us consider sound poetry not (as might be tempting) by some tight definition that gave a climactic structure to the argument of the critic or poet who offers it-the revelation-of-the-here-to-fore-unknown-truth kind of discussion-and simply use "sound poetry" as, generally, poetry in which the sound is the focus, more than any other aspect of the work.

Three basic types of sound poetry from the relative past come to mind immediately: folk varieties, onomatopoeic or mimetic types, and nonsense poetries. The folk roots of sound poetry may be seen in the lyrics of certain folk songs, such as the Horse Songs of the Navajos or in the Mongolian materials collected by the Sven Hedin expedition.¹ We have some of this kind of thing in our own culture, where sound poetry fragments are apt to be used at the ends of stanzas, such as the French "il ron ron petit patte à pont" in "Il était une bergère," or the English "heigh down hoe down derry derry down" in "The Keeper." Similarly, in Black American music there is a sound poetry tradition, possibly based originally on work calls, which we find metatacized into the skat singing styles of the popular music of the 1930's, in the long nonsense-like passages in Cab Calloway's singing of "Minnie the Moocher," for example.

In written literature, by contrast, most of the sound poetry fragments are brief, onomatopoeic imitations of natural or other sounds, for example the "Brekekex ko-ax ko-ax" of the frogs in Aristophanes' drama, or the "jug jug jugs" of the birds among the Elizabethans. This use of sound has no semantic sense to speak of, although, on occasion, its freshness consists of possible overlaps between nonsense and sense. Even some recent sound poetry has an onomatopoeic element. For example, my own *Requiem for Wagner the Criminal Mayor* is above all a structural piece, but its sounds resemble the fighting of cats and also the so-called "Bronx cheer" of traditional calumny.

Some of the most interesting sound poetry is the purely nonsense writing of the periods in Western literature when nonsemantic styles and forms were not supposed to be taken in full earnest. One of their delights is the art with which they parody the styles of their authors' native tongues. Try this English example, for instance, from the Victorian, Edward Lear:

Thrippsy pillowins,

Inky tinky pobblebookle abblesquabs?

Flosky! beebul trimple flosky!-Okul scratcha-

bibblebongebo, viddle squibble tog-a-tog, ferrymoyassity

amsky flamsky ramsky damske crocklefether squiggs.

Flunkywisty poom.

Slushypipp.²

While not set up as verse and therefore not exactly sound poetry, this text is from the period when prose poems were re-developed, and it tropes the style of a conventional polite letter of its period quite admirably. Another well-known example from its time would be the nonsense words in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky --'Twas brillig in the slithy toves. . ." and that kind of thing. The protagonist is equipped with a "vorpal" sword, and speculation on that kind of sword has been abundant ever since. When I was a child I had a science fiction magazine in my possession-long since vanished-in which two genius children invented a "vorpal" sword to protect themselves against an invasion of creatures from another dimension, and there are currently even a literary magazine in California and an art gallery in New York City named-what else?-*Vorpal*. Thus though no meaning has ever been assigned definitively to "vorpal," the word has become familiar as a sort of empty word, significant for its lack of meaning and for its harmony in a sentence of other, more semantically significant English words.

Similarly, in Christian Morgenstern's "Gespräch einer Haussechnecke mit sich selbst," from the famous *Galgenlieder*, a snail asks if it should dwell in its shell, but the word fragments progress arid compress into strange, decidedly ungrammatical constructs; these use a sort of inner ear and inner grammar of the German language which reveal a great deal about the sounds and potential of that language:³

Soll i aus meim Hause raus

Soll i aus meim Hause nit raus?

Einen Schritt raus?

Lieber nit raus?

Hausenitraus-

Hauseraus

Hauseritraus

Hausenaus

Rauserauserause ...

which Max Knight has translated as follows:

Shall I dwell in my shell?

Shall I not dwell in my shell?

Dwell in shell?

Rather not dwell?

Shall I not dwell,

shall I dwell,

dwel in shell

shall I shell,

shall IshellIshallIshellIshallI...

Of course in German the last five words can be perfectly compressed into one invented word each, which cannot be done to the same extent in English. This illustrates not only the uniqueness of the German language but also the unique relationship between successful sound poetry and the effective use of the linguistic potentialities in any given language.

II - When sound poetry becomes conscious of itself as just another genre

At some point around the time of the First World War it ceased to be assumed that sound poetry could only be used for light or humorous works or as interludes in otherwise traditional pieces, or as something so unique that each poem appeared to be the first sound poem in history-assumptions that seem to underlie most early sound poems. The sense of pioneering was replaced by the sense of potential mastery, and a tradition of sound poetry was precipitated. Implicit in this development is the even more radical aesthetic shift which seems to have begun at this time (and to have become even more pronounced recently, since, say, the late 1950's) that it is no longer de rigueur that a poem must attempt to be powerful, meaningful or even necessarily communicative (a main assumption of the 18th and 19th century poetries). I have developed this observation more fully elsewhere,⁴ but basically my argument is that poetries which used means which, while not unknown, were not usually taken seriously in the West, especially visual as well as sound poetry,⁵ could now be accepted as valid possibilities and genres.⁶ Thus the *parole in libertà* (1909) of the futurist F. T. Marinetti or the dada *lautgedichte* of Hugo Ball (1917), both of which flourished at this time and both of which, while they may include elements of humor, are not particularly intended as *divertissements* as is, for instance, the Edward Lear piece I cited. The cycle since then is a sort of arc of increasing acceptance of these genres as our mentality has shifted from the normative art of power in the late 19th century towards an art of experience and paradigm today. As a measure of just how much a Ball *lautgedicht* (a work which probably seemed quite esoteric at the time of its composition) is accepted, one can point to the use of Ball's "I Zimbra" in its surprising appearance as the lyrics to a recently popular song by the punk rock group, The Talking Heads.⁷ The punk rock song, like Ball's poem, opens with "Gadji bera bimba dandridi," which is not even anchored in the parody of any *one* language but is purely without reference to *any* known language. This in turn evokes the possibility of an artificial invented language, an idea which was also explored at this same time in the Russian Iliazd's "zaoum" or the German Stefan George's "lingua romana" pieces. In our taxonomy, then, works in an artificial or non-existent language will be the first class of modern sound poems.⁸

A second class comprises works in which the joy or other significance of the work lies in the interplay between the semantically meaningful lines or elements and those which are probably nonsense. It is thus related to the first class, and such pieces often use found materials collaged into the text, as it were, so that one gets either a shock of recognition or a momentarily heightened sense of immediate, concrete reality. These works parallel, conceptually, the early collages of Picasso or Braque with their inclusion of newspaper fragments among the forms on the canvas, or the use of photographs by the dadaists and such Bauhaus figures as Moholy-Nagy, or the *objets trouvés* of Marcel Duchamp. That traditional critics can still be puzzled by such works is indicated by the titles of the contributions to a

1972 issue of *Text+Kritik* devoted to the writings of Kurt Schwitters, the German near-dadaist who flourished in the 1920's and later. Sample titles: "Kurt Schwitters' Poem 'To Anna Blume': Sense or Nonsense?" or "On the Function of the Reality Fragments in the Poetry of Kurt Schwitters," etc.⁹ Another such device, though not one that fits into sound poetry, would be the "newsreel" passages of John Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy, which I only mention as a parallel paradigm.

A third class might be called "phatic poems," poems in which semantic meaning, if any, is subordinate to expression of intonation, thus yielding a new emotional meaning which is relatively remote from any semiotic significance on the part of words which happen to be included. If, for example, one were to wail the words "blue" and "night" repeatedly over a period of time, the initial function of those words to establish a frame for the wail would soon become unimportant by comparison with the musicality of the wail itself and the residual meaning of the two words would come to seem more like an allusion than a conveyor of meaning. One would have, in effect, an invocation without anything specific being invoked. This is precisely the effect which one gets from the recently re-discovered recording by Antonin Artaud of his "Pour en finir avec le jugement se dieu," which was originally recorded in the late 1940's a short time before the poet's death, broadcast (causing a great scandal), and then lost for many years until Arrigo Lora-Totino unearthed it in the archives of Radiodiffusion Francaise.¹⁰ Here Artaud uses more-or-less conventional words, but they are, as I have suggested, essentially allusions-or perhaps illusions, since so few can be understood anyway. Instead Artaud's emphasis is on high sighing, breathing, wheezing, chanting, exclaiming, exploding, howling, whispering and avoiding.

Poems without written texts constitute a fourth class. They may have a rough schema or notation that is akin to a graphic musical one (and there are those who regard a magnetic tape as a sort of notation), or there may be some general rules, written out like those of a game, which, if followed, will produce a performance of the work. But by comparison with the role of the written text and the heard result in traditional poetry or in the previous sound poetries that we have discussed (except, perhaps, the previous class, the phatic poems), they are relatively unnotated. Highlights in this class would be Henri Chopin's explorations of the voice by means of microphone and tape recorder, François Dûfrène's very phatic *crirhythmes* series (which, perhaps, constitute a transitory class between the phatic poems and the un-written-out ones), or the highly sophisticated tape recorded poems produced in the recording studio by such artists as the Swedes, Bengt Emil Johnson, Sten Hanson and others." A very large portion of the recorded literature of sound poetry, especially in Europe, is of this type, presumably because of the inherent close connection between such works and audio recording as an industry. Although this is also the class in which most American sound poetry falls, the American literature tends to be aesthetically naive by comparison to the European (and Canadian) works. The artists seem ill at ease with the very "performance" of their "texts." For example, there are some ten records in the *Poetry Out Loud* series edited by Peter and Patricia Harleman, which seem somehow like an extension of the beat poetry of the 1950's with its heavy jazz influence, its anti-formal bias and its dogmatic insistence upon the freshness of improvisation.¹² There exist also similar records edited and produced independently by John Giorno, whose work tends to sound improvised even when it is not. These have isolated fragments of rich material, but most are heavy-handed in their unformed iconoclasm. Fortunately, even in America, there are exceptions such as the works of Jackson Mac Low, Richard Kostelanetz and Charles Stein which are not of this sort.

The fifth class is the notated sound poem, which comprises the largest volume of sound poetry to date. By "notation" here I am referring to the normative sort of musical notation, in which there is some kind of correspondence between space, time, word and sound and some form of

graphic or textual indicator of these elements. Some of these notations closely resemble musical notations and have elaborate scores, such as the work in the 1940's of the *lettriste* Isidore Isou or the monumentally complex works that came out of Germany in the 1950's, such as Hans G. Helms' Golem or Wolfgang Harig's *das fussballspiel/ein stereophonisches hörspiel*, a page of which is reproduced herewith:



Harig's *das fussballspiel* ("the soccer game") is, as its cover proclaims, "a stereophonic radio play," the word for which is, in German, appropriately enough, "hörspiel" or "hear-play." The resources called for on the depicted page alone are one chorus which evidently is working in unison here with a second and third chorus, a man and a woman. The work was first broadcast by Sudwestfunk in Stuttgart on April 11, 1966.¹³

However, it could also be argued that any text, when it is taken as a work of art by a person who does not understand the meaning of its words, is conceptually transformed into a sound poem of this class. For example, in February 1960, during a now-legendary performance of some "Happenings" at New York's Judson Church, Claes Oldenburg (who later became celebrated as a pop artist) read aloud to his American audience from a Swedish translation of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Since Oldenburg's Swedish is excellent, what the audience heard was all the phatic and phonetic materials of the Swedish language. Once the spectator gave up trying to understand the semantic meaning of the words, the result was fresh and meaningful on another plane.

Another such development is the use of a work which was presumably designed for an experience in some other medium in poetry, to produce a

sort of intermedial translation. For example, there is the intertextual and intermedial relationship of sound poetry and concrete poetry. Concrete poetry is, quite roughly, the genre of visual poetry which uses writing or the letters of the alphabet presented visually or systemically, as opposed to visual poems which are photographic, environmental, conceptual, temporal, etc.¹⁴ Concrete poetry became a widespread phenomenon in the 1950's and 1960's. However, occasionally the need to perform concrete poetry "live" would arise. So when the poets would be asked to read their work aloud, they would often use the printed texts by analogy to musical notations, thus transforming them into notated sound poems. So close is the connection between sound poetry and concrete poetry, in fact, that many artists have done both and, in fact, one of the first phonographic recordings of sound poetry as such, the 1966 -konkrete poesie/sound poetry/artikulationen," by its very title indicates the near-identity of sound and concrete poetry; some of the artists included, such as Ernst Jandl, Franz Mon and Lily Greenham, are known in both areas, and Ms. Greenham has toured in Europe and North America with her live performances of concrete poetry translated into sound poetry.

Finally, within this fifth class there is another hybrid, sound poems which are also radio plays, or which seemed designed to be heard not as a unique experience but as part of something else, so that the sound of the words is accompanied by the meanings from some different area of experience. One hears the text with only half one's attention, as one hears most radio broadcasts with only half one's attention; this is more or less inherent in the nature of radio, that one plays it while watering the house plants, while driving through heavy traffic, or while sorting out the addresses in one's address book. My own *Le petit cirque au fin du monde* and *Ommaje* are of this subclass. The first is a "hear-play" written in French, a language I do not speak well, so that the errors in it are part of its texture, and it was broadcast repeatedly over the public address system at the University of Vincennes by Jean-Jacques Lebel's students during the May 1968 insurrection in France, a perfect environment for that piece.

These, then, are the five relatively modern classes of sound poetry:

- 1 works in an invented language,
- 2 near-nonsense works
- 3 phatic poems,
- 4 un-written-out poems, and
- 5 notated ones.

Obviously some of the modern works being generated today still fall within the three classes I described earlier in older sound poetry:

- 1 folk varieties,
- 2 onomatopoeic or mimetic pieces, and
- 3 nonsense poetries which trope their own languages.

For example, there is no doubting the modernity or avant-garde credentials of the Toronto-based group, The Four Horsemen, whose members perform both separately and together. In their performances they allude constantly to folk or popular culture, to the extent of wearing the kind of elaborate, almost psychedelic clothes associated with rock and roll groups-and they even trope the style of rock and roll to the point of listening to each other take riffs and solos and playing off each other as any tight rock group would. Their presentations are deliberately popular and light-spirited in order to minimize the gulf that usually exists between performer and audience in the new arts. Yet, formally this work belongs to two of the oldest of sound

poetry traditions-the folk and nonsense traditions. In no way does this work to the detriment of their achievement, but rather it serves to remind us of something very deep within us which sound poetry expresses clearly when it is at its best-the love of the sound of poetry.

III - **Some Boundaries and Non-Boundaries of Sound Poetry**

Now that we have examined some eight classes of things that sound poetry is, it might be fruitful to turn our attention briefly to some things that sound poetry either is not, or is not yet.

One thing that sound poetry is not is music. Of course it has a musical aspect-a strong one. But if one compares typical sound poetry pieces with typical musical ones, music is usually the presentation or activation of space and time by means of the occurrences of sound. This is the nature of the most traditional Mozart piano pieces or Irish unaccompanied airs as of the most innovative John Cage musical inventions. But *any* poetry relates space, time and sound to experience. Thus sound poetry points in a different direction, being inherently concerned with communication and its means, linguistic and/or phatic. It implies subject matter; even when some particular work is wholly non-semantic, as in the microphonic vocal explorations of Henri Chopin, the non-semantic becomes a sort of negative semantics-one is conscious of the very absence of words rather than, as in vocal music, merely being aware of the presence of the voice. Thus, for the sound poet certainly and probably for the audience as well, the creation or perception of a work as sound poetry has to do with questions of meaning and experience which are not essentially musical. We identify what we are hearing more than we would if we were listening to music. We are very concerned with just who or what is saying or doing what.

Some of the things that sound poetry has not yet become are intermedia. Intermedia are those formal, conceptual areas of the arts which fall between already accepted media, such as visual poetry falling between the visual arts and poetry. However there is always a tendency for intermedia, experienced with increasing familiarity, to become themselves new media. Thus, taking sound poetry no longer as an intermedium but as a medium, it would be exciting if the sound poets would explore these three new intermedia: (1) those between sound poetry and linguistic analysis, (2) those between sound poetry and sculpture, to produce profoundly three-dimensional poetic constructs and not merely analytical ones, and (3) between sound poetry and the environment.

In the first of these new intermedia, we could use electronic means to apply the analyzed sounds of one language to the conceptual structure of another to see what aesthetic effects would be made possible. We could write English with the transformations of German. We could generate new categories of what the linguists have called "illegal" sentences-sentences that have no possible correspondences in the physical world (e.g., Noam Chomsky's famous "colorless green ideas sleep furiously"). All sorts of new macaronics would be worth exploring-puns and mixtures among different languages, not to be humorous but to expand our experiences.

In the second new intermedium poems would appear in situations and points of space, and would move towards other situations and points of space in an exciting way. Masses of sound and word, physical presence of more words-these things would enable new poetic structures to enter into our experience.

Finally, the third intermedium could exist in environments and situations which we do not normally regard as poetic. We could have poems for sauna baths, for sunsets, for the experiencing of elections from among the apple trees. We could use aspects of these places that would aestheticize our relationships to them, as, traditionally, a prayer was supposed to spiritualize

our relationship to its circumstances—a prayer for night time, a prayer for those who were lost at sea. There is a lot to be done in these areas and more.

Barrytown, New York

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Henning Haslund-Christiansen, *The Music of the Mongols: Eastern Mongolia* (1943; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971).

² Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense Book* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1934), p. 10.

³ Christian Morgenstern, *The Gallows Songs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 28-29.

⁴ I have developed this argument more fully in three parts of: Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts*. Second Edition. (New York: Printed Editions, 1979), pp. xi, 3-9, 93-101, and also in: Dick Higgins, *George Herbert's Pattern Poems: In Their Tradition* (New York: Printed Editions, 1977), pp. 18-19.

⁵ The early history of visual poetry is my subject in the work listed in footnote 4, above. Its bibliography will also be useful for anyone seeking to explore the matter farther. For a similar discussion of sound poetry, but one which continues into modern times as well, the best such article in English is that of Stephen Ruppenthal and Larry Wendt, "Vocable Gestures: A Historical Survey of Sound Poetry," in *Art Contemporary 5* (1978) [La Mamelle, Inc., P.O. Box 3123, San Francisco, CA 941191], pp. 57-8, 80-104. A large study of the subject by Henri Chopin is due to be published shortly in France, which should help fill in the gap in historical scholarship in sound poetry.

⁶ For an example of a naïve attack on visual poetry, see Hippolyte Taine, *History of English Literature* (New York: Holt & Williams, 1872), v. 4, p. 54. Another such attack is in Joseph Addison, *Spectator 58*, many editions.

⁷ The Talking Heads' "I Zimbra" is on their album, *Fear of Music* (New York: Sire Records, 1979), SRK 6076.

⁸ Many excellent examples of such work are given in Eugene Jolas, "From Jabberwocky to Lettrisme" in *Transition Forty-Eight* (1948), v. 1, n. 1, pp. 104-120.

⁹ *Text+Kritik* (1972), n. 35/36, pp. 13 and 33.

¹⁰ Arrigo Lora-Totino, ed., *Futura/Poesia Sonora* (Milano: Cramps Records, 1979), 5206 304. This seven-record set contains a large book of notes with many materials that are unavailable elsewhere.

¹¹ Recordings of highlights of seven of the International Sound Poetry Festivals, held at Stockholm from 1968 to 1975, can be found on five records from Sveriges Radios Förlag, RELP 1049, 1054, 1072, 1073 and 1074, and on two from Fylkingen Records, RELP 1102 and 1103.

¹² *Poetry Out Loud* (St. Louis, MO: Out Loud Productions, 1971 to 1977).

¹³ Ludwig Harig, *das fussbalspiel: ein stereophonisches hörspiel* (Stuttgart: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1967).

¹⁴ I say "roughly" because, for purposes of discussion, I am ignoring the sub-genre of concrete poetry which is either calligraphic or is written in non-legible writing. Many fine anthologies of concrete poetry have appeared. For example, one of the largest, one which is technically out of print but which is often found, is Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967).

¹⁵ Anastasia Bitzos, ed., *konkrete poesie / soundpoetry / artikulationen* (Bern: Anastasia Bitzos, 1966). Ms. Bitzos produced at least one other such record as well. There also are several records of Lily Greenham's sound poetry translations of concrete, for example:

internationale sprachexperimente der 50/60er jahre / international language experiments of the 50/60ies [sic] (Frankfurt am Main: Edition Hoffmann, ca. 1970).

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