

Theorizing awareness of performance poetry: a close listening of "the blue roofs ...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



“ To listen is to simultaneously attend to what is present and what is absent”. In “ Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding,” Jed Rasula analyses the impact of the spoken word on the understanding of poetry. Historically, poetry, and most literary forms, started as an oral tradition. They were sung by bards in various cultures. The very notion of poetry, originating from the the ancient Greek *poiēsis* meaning “ to create”, has always implied a way of structuring sound to create meaning. However, the actual sound in poetry is undeniably the most overlooked aspect of the art form. The convention has long been to study what the poem “ says” and not take into account the layers of meaning added when spoken aloud. In poetry analysis, the sound pattern is sporadically mentioned and undeveloped as many scholars focus on the physical text itself. Another aspect of the sound in poetry that does not appear frequently, is the connotations attached to sounds. The rhyme, alliteration or the poet’s delivery is associated to the understanding of the message, however, the evaluation of sound as its own is regularly falls between the cracks. In the 20th Century, modern art movements such as Dadaism or Surrealism have strove to push the boundaries of our understanding of art. Sound Poetry is an effect of modernism in the way that it is a clear rejection on the “ need for meaning” all the while seeking to come back to its purest roots as an oral art form. Rafael Barreto-Rivera, a member of the Four Horsemen describes Sound Poetry as “ poetry which has its basis in non-verbal, vocal and sub-vocal elements of sounds”. These poems are generally difficult to explain as their interpretation is based in sensibility rather than sensible reasoning, and the “ liveness” of the performances are critical to reach any kind of understanding

at all. If one were to read one the Four Horsemen “ scores”, it would be quasi-impossible to perceive a significance. Some disagree that Sound Poetry needs to be free of words to showcase the prevailing of sound over text. Robert Bringhurst, a poet known for his linguistic clarity, writes a remarkable Performance Poem “ The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices” in which the live representation surpasses the text. The poem is written as a Jazz duet with two voices reading two parts, overlapping, synchronizing and singly spoken. The result is an apparent disconnect with the written words and a focus on the cadence of ideas dancing around each other. As both speakers read differing lines, occasionally overlapping each other, discerning every word is too complex for any audience. The listener has to free himself from fixating on tangible explanations and experience the performance intuitively.

The particularity of the overlapping speakers in “ The Blue Roofs in Japan” poem constituted a challenge for the publishers at Barbarian Press in 1987. Considering the poem was meant as an oral piece, conveying the simultaneous voices without disrupting the flow of the reading was met with a few hurdles. Bringhurst suggested to print the left voice in a darker color and have the right voice in a lighter color behind. The result was a confused “ muddy mess” as the publishing company points out. After a few trials and errors, they manage to come to a consensus by printing both voices side by side on the same page, each written in bold with the other text shadowing lightly behind. This enabled the speakers to read uninterruptedly all the while being able to follow the other’s lines. In the interest of hypothesizing the aforementioned supplemental effects of the performance in contrast with

the text, a critical listening of the poem is to be conducted before the critical analysis. The reverse would be less impactful as the audience would already be aware of the themes and would have preconceived expectations.

Although it would be interesting to note how the spoken piece's sounds vary the interpretation of a person already familiar with the text.

The simple fact that this poem is meant to be heard as it has "score" in its title, suggest that the performance is the author's main intent. Music and Poetry are regularly likened to each other as they both rely on rhythm, pitch or accentuation of stress. Both aim to affect the listener in a subconscious way. Bringham poem is a five part lyric poem in that it is an expression of emotional impressions, inward experiences. It could be debated to be a dramatic poem as it has two voices that seem to respond to each other, however, the melodic tune and implication the both voices work "as one" would lead one to assume it's the same discourse from different angles. Lyric in itself implies an accompaniment of a lyre, further relating to music. With time, lyric and music disassociated into distinct forms of art. Music is habitually examined by the manner in which the unity of the instrumental score and lyrics contribute to a higher understanding of the piece. Sound poetry relies similarly on the abstract sounds or words and the cadence working cooperatively to invoke a feeling. When the poem starts being read, a soft feminine voice can be heard but soon being slightly over powered by a stronger male voice taking command of the rhythm. The softer voice becomes a sort of echo mirroring and at times contradicting the other. The idea of interpenetrating voices would lead to staccato interjecting of

conflicting ideas. Having two speakers relying on the other would suggest ample rehearsal and an almost mechanical reading. “The Blue Roofs of Japan” manages to instill a melodic legato of sonority. The voices seem to represent a waltz of Inyō (The way of Ying and Yang in Chinese Taoism). Taking into account the titled reference to Japan, it may be suggestive of the Japanese syncretism of beliefs and observation of nature. Inyō is the representation of wholeness, embracing each aspect of life. The concept of good and evil does not come into this ideology. Both components are often represented as Female and Male, or Dark and Light. This furthers the speculation that the two voices in the poem are two sides of the same coin as nothing seems to confront the other but more readily flow into one another. The more prominent voice does not lead as much as it depicts a mirroring stance to the softer voice which is not submissive but rather elusively evocative of the same idea.

Although the voices are not always intelligible, some words are repeated and generating themes, even if the sentences are not clear. Many of the themes revolve around nature and most prominently “water”. Water is a recurring symbol in most cultures, but in Japan, the purifying powers of water transcend all religions. It is customary for Shinto practitioners to wash themselves before praying to the Kamis (Various Gods inhabiting the lakes, trees, mountains, or any natural phenomenon). This purification power of water is also found in Western cultures, possibly creating a deep connection in Bringham. The motif also illustrative of the pliant quality of water and its dual significance. Water is both a source of life and a source of destruction

which the poem alludes to by referring to its many forms and stressing the repetitions or dragging the words out with long drawls. It should also be noted that water is the most adaptable element and is commonly associated to empathy. The poem is sensitive and highly emotional when heard. The lilt and whirl of the round sounds are reminiscent of synchronic ripples in still water. The remarkable aptitude of the poem to call forth an array of emotions and meaning without understanding the actual content makes a strong case for Sound Poetry. The lack of musical instruments does not feel void and does not impede the musicality of the spoken word on its own. In fact the steady recurrence of brisk consonant alliteration and soft vocalic alliteration balance the piece. Similarly, the use of plosive sounds (p, t, b and d) and nasal sounding consonants (n, m), respectively convey happiness and melancholy.

At first glance, the dual voices seem to be competing to be in the forefront of the page. The bold lines superposed with the lighter ink behind sometimes get muddied and difficult to read. The lines are predominantly observational lyrics, inferring the poet's state of mind as he comes into contact with these experiences. Though for the most part, the poem vividly describes external scenery such as " the river marched through the Chinese grid/ of the city, not twisting but turning/ as sharp as a section-line road/through the Saskatchewan prairie.". It is important to note that the emphasis is on the speaker's perception and experiences about them. This is effective as one finishes the poem ultimately understanding a much wider, and perhaps universal resonance to nature and all its relevance on the greater scale of

life. This reminds of Percy Bysshe Shelley's suggestion that Poetry "strips the veil of familiarity from the world and lays it bare its naked sleeping beauty and wonder". The tone of the poem is meditative as the speakers are reflecting on the scenery. It almost reads as a train of thought or daydream brought on by the wondrous sights. The flow of the water through the lines strengthens this interconnectivity of one place to another. The entire second part of the poem embodies this journey of water and art. The left voice starts with "This music is all about water" and the right voice simultaneously says "This music is water, this water is music," lightly musing with the two universal symbols of communication, further hinting to this connection of everything.

The third and fourth part of the poem are a little less fluid and more grounded as they revolve around the structuring of nature and man to create art. Nevertheless the elements highlighted are the idea that art stems from the earth ("Writing is planting") and predates all artificial construction as Art has always existed in the cosmos. The fourth section comments briefly on the vain ambition of artists and calls for us to stop and take a minute to listen, to get in tune with all that surrounds us. Rasula also makes this one of his primordial points when he discusses the differences between "hearing" and "listening". His first distinction is made when he explains the "To listen is an act of attunement—". This draws a direct parallel with Bringham when he writes "Listen: this music/ is all about water. The words/ are the earth, and the music/ is is water.". Both insist on the act of taking the time to concentrate on what he hear in order to gather as much from the experience

as possible. The fourth part ends with a call back to the realization that “ The tongues of the gods include/ no dates and no names./This is the logos.”. The right voice echoes “ THIS is the logos” which leaves the listener or reader with the same feeling of emptiness. This void is not stripped to nothing for the sake of effect, but rather creates an intense moment of recognition of our minuteness. The last section brings the journey full circle by recounting all four elements and their working in harmony and the history of man that started in the water. Bringham speaks of “ Water and earth: what ties us together/ holds us apart” which alludes to the natural boundaries of nature that separate us and yet that we have in common. When the right speaker directly follows this with the ghostly “ What holds us apart/ is what ties us together.” insinuates man’s greediness with nature and the constant struggle for power, all the while not realizing that this earth is to be shared and to be grateful for. The poem end on the note of “ Facing the sky, be quiet wide and blue”, bringing us back to the blue roofs mentioned at its beginning. The journey started with the concrete man made object and took us through the world, then time and ending with a the silent infinity of the sky.

Although this poem can be read, the written themes coincide with the sounds when spoken. However, one must wonder why the sounds, when heard evoke the feelings conveyed by the poem without logical reference to the words. The experience of performing voices conjures a myriad associating expectations. Content is oftentimes difficult to extract immediately from highly personal lyric poems. Words have different

connotations depending on the person's personal background, context, personality etc, whereas feeling is instinctual. Our relation to sound is formed in the womb, and our relation to language is formed in early childhood. Many scientists have studied the effects of music on fetus, and have concluded that they start processing tonal key. Music perception is based on cognitive skills for decoding the emotional meaning. Our perception of language itself is colored with different experiences ranging from similar to vastly different, but human beings develop their first contact with the outside world through sounds. The voice is the initial tool for communication, and newborns utter sounds to express hunger, discontentment, glee etc. With age, children associate sound to tone, tone to meaning, and finally meaning to understanding. Once that happens, sound becomes a much less conspicuous aspect of connecting ideas. It nevertheless appears unlikely we would abandon that instinct, which in turn helps understand how we can draw so much from listening to sound poetry. Sidney Lanier, while studying the sound and its perception has found that "when formal poetry or verse... is repeated aloud, it impresses itself upon the ear as verse only by means of certain relations existing among its component words considered purely as sounds, without reference to their associated ideas". This is Lanier simply acknowledging that sound invokes instinctual interpretations no matter the logical definition of the words themselves. Darwin also theorizes sound association and suggest that "The imitation by articulate sounds of musical cries might have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions."

Experiencing an unfamiliar oral piece for the first time tends to cause the audience to either pursue their enjoyment by getting familiar with the written text and possibly the author's other works, or feel so disconnected with the piece they let it go completely. As Rasula points out, "When sound and sense come together the sound renders "sense" senseless, or precariously sensed by being overcharged, as if everything that signifies profoundly needed to be profoundly sensuous as well. Everyday speech is happily exempted from such an aspiration, but poetry is not". By that notion, when a poem such as "The Blue Roofs of Japan" is heard without forming formal sense to the associated references, the understanding is left to the pleasure one gets from simply letting the performance engulf one's being for that moment. Considering this poem is transparent in its intent of being an oral piece, it defines itself by the sound being the fringe of its understanding.

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