

Music in Poetry. Surrounding the Avant-Garde

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[...] Impossible
to hear it anymore. The tongue
is forever taking us away
from where we are, and nowhere
can we be at rest
in the things we are given
to see, for each word
is an elsewhere, a thing that moves
more quickly than the eye, even
as this sparrow moves, veering
into the air
in which it has no home [...].

Paul Auster, *Facing the Music* [1947]

In this short talk, I would like to point out the role of music *in* poetry as a draft of a theoretical discourse on avant-garde. While inquiring into this typology of interaction, I don't refer to music *and* poetry, and I do this on purpose. The assumption of the symmetrical couple of terms, music and poetry, would imply the acceptance of their distance, as the composer Isabel Mundry said while commenting her encounter with the writer Tawada Yoko: «the attempt to make start a productive dialog between language and music simply resulted in the perception that this dialog was possible only if the differences were accepted and appreciated» (Caduff 2011, 89). Using a word apparently so easy to share, as *interaction* actually is, I suggest in that a remark of defeat, so to say, frustration, lack of dialogic aptitude, even disappointment. Here is the reason why I am about to depict this peculiar interplay with an idea of surrendering, renouncing, giving-up. I assume as

entirely true, and as a starting point for my brief account on this subject-matter, what Jean L. Kreiling (2010, 37) affirms: «by opening a window onto one listener's perceptions and associations, a poem may offer fresh access to a musical work. Admittedly, a reader who has some familiarity with a poem's musical subject may find the poetic treatment excessively idiosyncratic; another reader might lament the gulf between musical experience and verbal expression».

A leading figure in 20th Century poetics, Paul Valéry, admits, as he writes to Robert Bernard, in February, 1944: «music intimidates me, and the art of the musician confuses me. It has available all the powers I envy». With this quotation Hermann Fähnrich introduces in 1974 a short account upon the history of this kind of envy, throughout Valéry's inquiry on poetry and music, as it is testified in private letters (Fähnrich 1974, 48). In those considerations, a paradoxical continuity seems come to light. The perception of the Wagnerian revolution by Valéry, together with his building up this kind of envy face to music, and finally with his resolution to abandon poetry much to the advantage of mathematics, since the “night in Genoa”, mid-September 1892, up to 1917 (McCormick 2010, 80) are strictly linked. Wagner's impact on the aesthetics in process lead by Valéry is decisive, indeed. According to Valéry's ear, Wagner comes to deeply musicalize, so to say, the acoustic perception of everyday life, making the listener ready to embrace courtyard noises, mechanical sounds, bells, rumblings of storms, in a potentially undetermined bubble of sound, where a self-built, private cognitive system begins to take steps into a systematization of chaos. In other words, to all those practices and gestures related to the avant-garde movements in the three first decades of 20th Century. Hence, that idea of envy. Which consists, just as Primo Levi writes down some decades later, of both frustration and desire (Levi [1985] 1997, 116).

In his Wagnerian-like silence of poetry, as well as in his taking account of noises and losses of determinacy as new possible features of a revolutionary concept of music, Paul Valéry takes a step forward than D'Annunzio and his attempt to reconcile Wagner and Amiel in a neo-hegelian way of perception based on «musique dépersonalisée», as Ezio Raimondi (1976, 37) pointed out.

Music *in* poetry neither provides to Valéry any dialectical interaction, nor peaceful analogies. It requires above all the listener to give a proof of submission, a loss of equilibrium, in order to give articulated language a set of compositional rule. This loss gets the major role against any well-balanced analogy, but even against metaphorical suggestions. Those powers, that Valéry states to envy, merge all in that system of laws and resources implied by music. Let us now put this idea in relationship with other statements, surrounding the theory of avant-garde. Music in poetry, according to Valéry, might be related - if we are allowed to borrow a so celebrated definition from Gertrude Stein's philosophy of narrating (Stein [1926] 1967, 21-30) – to the practice of *explanation*.

Music, as we consider it as a peculiar process of composition, shows a potentially endless, but in fact strictly ruled field. Within this field, relations constantly change, whereas every individual element remains alike. *Composition* is here used in a wide way, which conducts to a “musical” definitions of myth, and to a strategic vision of history itself, like Bruce Bassoff (1976, 78) once noticed. This exercise of explanation consists of a self-exegesis which keeps operating in repetitions and new beginnings. Sentences come to birth in contradiction, in self-explanatory turnings, in repetition. So, the act of writing moves a troubled battlefield, lasted throughout a continuous present, which makes the text explained without being deciphered, in order to affirm its authority against a dialectical *logos*, and face to the reader «its capacity to disengage its sentences, fragments, and phrases from each other and from the conventions of everyday communication» (Kaufmann 1999, 222).

The same strategic properties appear shared with music: a whole self-interpretation spread out in time, by which the logic and the constitution of meaning can be surrounded and anticipated rather than imitated. This recalls what Julia Kristeva (1974, 40) defines *chora*, the place of the Semiotic, instead of the Symbolic: that realm of «fluxes and marks», where meaningfulness starts to be heard and perceived by a primary intuition, not by an established convention.

Considered as a set of provocative behaviors and public gestures, avant-garde puts in question a kind of competitiveness, which reflects somehow, and amplifies, this unbalanced relationship

between poetry and music, ore more in general, between poetry and other arts. My hypothesis is that this lack of equality might be somehow connected to a preliminary waging-war aptitude, which led every time the public activism of avant-garde movements – Renato Poggioli (1962, 80) calls it «agonismo», relating it primarily to Italian futurism. But the consciousness of inequality can also result in a multiplicity of strategies, made to put in discussion the linearity of analogy as a general process of thinking.

From now on, I will just briefly mention some attempts and results in challenging this linearity. They will find place not only in historically considered avant-garde movements, but rather in a common substrate of mutual connections among theories, that are easily traceable throughout Modernism.

I would like to recall here the considerations of a mostly unintended forerunner, Gerard Manley Hopkins, upon his own poetry. In general, the foreground given by him to the perception of music in the shaping of a personal, but nonetheless influential, theory of style. As John Hollander (1975, 203) states, the self-comments written by Hopkins aim to clarify the presence of music deeply into the technicalities of verse, with a radicalization of well-known Romantic principles, just as in this sample of an extended bar-foot analogy (Hopkins [1881] 1959, 273): «the musical syllable is the note, the musical foot or word the bar, the bars in double time stand for double feet or metra and for, say, unverbale sub-clauses, the strains or *phrases* for wing-clauses, the passage or melody down to the cadence for the sentence, the movement for the paragraph, the piece for the discourse». Besides, Hopkins' self-comment goes on to legitimate «modulation», and also musical «rests» as formal and rhythmical features for poetry. Overall, music fascinates Hopkins primarily for its immediate perception of duration, quantity, and nonetheless for its property of spreading a flow of words and images in a well-ordered sequence of time, just as Greek and Latin quantitative prosody seems him to do.

But on the other hand, what distinguished Hopkins from various attempts of rendering music in poetry using a rigidly analogical and neo-Newtonian approach – e.g. *The Science of English Verse*

by Sidney Lanier, 1880 – remains the fact that Hopkins never detects rhythm, melody and harmony in poetry as separate fields to be rigidly transferred from music to words. Despite all the troubles caused by the huge amount of technicalities he keeps using, Hopkins keeps always searching for a systemic representation of music, whose he claims to include together, and therefore to compare, the most advanced means of expression, like those involved in modern agogics, as Christopher Wilson (2000, 74) properly underlines.

While approaching to the inner musical substratum of his own poetry, Hopkins treats music dynamically, just like a body in motion: his concept of «counterpoint», widely employed as a typological mark in the classification of English traditional verse, seems to be definitely shifted from its proper meaning in traditional harmony to another one related to rhythm, and its overlapping. In other words, rhythm becomes the relational surface between tradition – symbolized by metrical standards, and their remains – and the individual tendency to build a new set of technicalities, fit to describe all the features of poetic performance. Besides, we should underline that every reference of music here belongs to the research of a «theodicy» (Hartman 1966, 56), which treats sounds and rhythms as parts of a – so to say - spiritualized set of functions. In Hopkins' drafts, the articulated sound keeps in the background its physical nature, and releases its energy like a resilient body, projected into a dense space. This reminds the reader that the text he is approaching represents a unity, a whole, casting on each page its faithful projection of universe.

It deals with a universe, in Hopkins' view, very detailed in its parts, and plenty of concrete objects, whose first way of arising to the reader's attention is a combination of articulated sounds. Originated from sounds as it is, each one of these objects and phenomenons is featured by its own «*inscape*»: a rightly renowned term, coined by Hopkins to render «a poetic approximation to a metaphysical reality». As asserted by Marjorie Coogan, Hopkins owes the roots of his invention to scholasticism, and boldly to Duns Scotus, whose idea of *ecceitas*, the designed individuality of any object of perception (Coogan 1950, 68, 67), stays for him as a point to lean on. In general, new coinages in Hopkins' self-comments are directed to give birth to a new philosophy of composition:

«terminology in this baby science is defective», he notices (Hopkins 1881 [1959], 100). Meanwhile, when he inquires into this spiritualized notion of music, he aims to be concretely, sensorily close to the plenitude of what we might call a symbolic action. All this, however, with no involvement in any symbolist redefinition of arts, their hierarchies and mutual connections.

On the other hand, Symbolism occupies a major place as a matter of inquiries and definitions in Andrej Belyj's aesthetics, since the very beginning of 20th Century. This is for us another way to consider music *in* poetry as an attempt of spiritualization. Even more articulately than Hopkins, Belyj gives music the task to explore as a universal pathway in order to found subjectivity on new bases, and to reconcile the creative mind with the cognitive one, in those Kantian terms which keep standing at the ground of his philosophy of art (Cassedy 1984, 209).

Being musical means thus for Belyj to convey from the Romantic generation that idea of a fluid architecture, which leads from Schlegel to Wagner (Belyj [1911] 1986, 31). Even in Schopenhauer, quoted often by Belyj as a turning point in aesthetics, every understanding turns into an ability of hearing, just because every single phenomenon or object has its own music to be heard, whereas it does not properly deal with acoustics. It is something like an inner soul of things and events (Belyj [1910] 1986, 160), whose nature above all poets are requested to gather.

Once more, we face to the further consequence of the Wagnerian analogy amongst arts we mentioned, but declined here by Belyj in terms of normative poetics. Belyj's symbolism makes kind of a junction between Wagnerism and a new quantitative theory of meter, which puts him at the final point of a pathway clearly described by Steven Cassedy (1987, 313) in his summarizing essay on the origins of Belyj's thinking in Humboldt's philosophy. Cassedy also mentions Belyj's theoretical debts with such a physio-psychologist as Wilhelm Wundt, in a combination with the theory of quantitative verse provided by German philologists in the second half of 19th Century. As a matter of fact, Cassedy underlines finally how Belyj proceeds away from these sources of thinking, until he becomes a predecessor for the formalist verse analysis elaborated by Boris Tomaševskij, and Roman Jakobson, in solid correlations with Russian futurism.

By the way, what follows – I apologize, I am not able to read it in Russian, so that I can only provide here a rude translation from Italian - shows how Belyj conceives music as a set of transferable properties (Belyj [1910] 1986, 255): «the architecture of foot – verse, couplet – in poetry is strictly related to music; this connection of poetry with the musical pathos of the soul, which keeps itself alive at the present time, distinguished poetic rhythm from meter; meter is rhythm crystallized in historically determined forms; but form in itself is crystallized only from an external point of view in fixed boundaries».

With this reference to music, Belyj puts in question, just as Hopkins does, a distinction between rhythm and meter. His own typology lies on phenomenological grounds, and makes also reference to agogics, in music as well as in the theory of verse at his times: «within its limits lies a series, made of temporal moments that are irrational – slight movements of acceleration as well as slowdowns; the accumulation of these accelerations and slowdowns towards one specific direction may create a series of brand new temporary metrical forms, with no explicit violation of the boundaries belonging to an original form; this is why we usually discern rhythm and meter». As far as we can see, Belyj comes here closer than ever to a kind of “negative” definition of rhythm, shared in fact with Valéry: «in the genetic development of poetic forms musical rhythm is something close to meter; in a specific poetic form it is the opposite: rhythm is always kind of a uncovered fight, whose expression traps us more than anything else in individual forms». (Belyj [1910] 1986, 256).

Belyj's distinction sounds like a warning notice, or even like an *explanation*, in Gertrude Stein's meaning: relationships between musical and poetic rhythm should be resumed and built again from the ground, and a comparative history of poetic forms gives the artist a thread of traditional notions to be recombined newly. Belyj turns his own definitions of rhythm, differently both in poetry and music. He chooses a terminology derived of psychological analysis, and change it around in order to create a complete taxonomy. This assumption deals with reviewing subjectivity, opening up perception, and unconsciously foster the powerful role of the avant-garde in exploiting that same

unbalanced relationship of poetry and music that we meant above as prime perspective. And this is the right place, where formalism and avant-garde are finally allowed to meet and sustain each other.

Beside Belyj's *Symbolism*, it might be useful to mention another stride forward in the relationship between rhythm and subjectivity. This is made by Ezra Pound, and by that notion of *melopoeia* he determined to employ when reviewing two books of poems by Marianne Moore and Mina Loy (Pound 1918, 57): «to wit, poetry which moves by its music, whether it be a music in the words or an aptitude for, or suggestion of, accompanying music». We could relate this peculiar notion of poetry «which moves by its music» to a couple of features: Pound's «persistent melomania», as Harvey Gross points out, which realizes itself in «a preference for a quantitative prosody» (Gross 1965, 132, 135). But from the other hand we should separate the poundian *melopoeia* from Hopkins' attempts of musicalization of words, according to Gross again: «[Pound] does not, however, advocate Greek and Latin meters in English. The poet must exercise care in the handling of his syllables, not making the impossible attempt [...] of devising grammatical rules for English quantity».

Melopoeia is therefore a way of handling words throughout the duration of time, and the self-assertion of an individual voice through the rhythm of a poem. But it is also true that this voice, according to Maud Ellmann's analysis, turn often up *impersonal*. That is, made of a multiplicity of different voices, like an unfinished overlapping of historical sources, quotations, characters, idiosyncratic conflicts spread out and perceived along the flowing of time. As Ellmann states, «Pound denounces space, making time into the cornerstone of his cosmology. Like Bergson, he believes that personally inheres in time, and represent itself most faithfully in rhythm» (Ellmann 1987, 163). This faith in the representative values of time, as well as this discover of multiplicity in voices, character and events embraceable by a poem, allows us to separate the poundian notion of music in poetry from those belonging to Hopkins and Belyj. Then, what is the most important to us, this lets us identify whatever historically lies between them as the acoustic experience of avant-garde.

We already mentioned the waging-war aptitude of avant-garde movements as a main feature in public gestures and provocative behaviors. We said it could be some way related to the disproportion implied by the relationship between music and poetry. The avant-garde handlings of this matter could be a clearer response now.

Let us take for example Erik Satie, a composer deeply linked with the Dada experience. In his *Mémoires d'un amnésique*, 1912, he treats the practice of composition ironically. He calls himself a «phonometrographer» (Satie [1912] 1980, 55), and he foresees with this light mockery that aptitude which will last for decades in avant-garde movements: to make the material consistency of sounds a new field of research. As a matter of fact, avant-garde allows music to be processed, decomposed, technologically treated. The mechanization of music symmetrically responds to the spiritualized dominion which affected the relationships with poetry.

Now music really becomes an actual set of noises, which embraces in itself the chaotic sounds of everyday life. This is exactly the turning point towards the origin of our short talk: the perception of Wagner's work by Paul Valéry. Once more, the experience of avant-garde gaughters with Valéry's envy of music all its «values of shock», as Valéry himself named them in a letter to Leo Ferrero (Valéry [1929] 1957, 1240). This values meas, as Valéry notices, a great defeat for aesthetics, but at the same time a new field of actual interaction for word and music: the sound as a dominion of matter, physical utterance; even the howl, the conflict, the harsh friction. And poetry, of course, the same way.

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