Sound Poetry: Transcending “Cerebral Trappings”
by Lindsey Allgood

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As babies, we babbled with joy when happy and wailed with every muscle of our little bodies when we grew uncomfortable. As adults, we repress our emotions, dab our eyes, and say, “It’s nothing.” What happened to the passion behind our self-expression, those basic guttural wails and ecstatic squeals? Society’s “developed” language limits our range of expression with grammar rules and dictionary definitions. In fact, our communication conventions stifle our expressive energy, resulting in a lost self-awareness of our deepest consciousness and creative source—of our connection to the rest of life on Earth. To counteract this deprivation, the art form of sound poetry attempts to release hidden emotion without censorship and to re-define—or un-define—the limits of self-expression. Ignoring conventions of lyric poetry like stanza and rhyme scheme, sound poetry broadens the dynamic capability of the human voice. It allows the poet to render intrinsic stirrings more directly and to recover the intensely intricate raw cacophony of feeling subdued within us.

A sound poem begins with the birth of a notion or sentiment in its primitive form, untouched by any societal rationale, which can steal the energy of original motivation. When we articulate these spontaneous promptings with vernacular words, we filter the substance through everyday rules of discourse. An artist seeks to exclude this restrictive censoring process from expression while creating and performing a sound poem. This kind of poetry is an aural experience, similar to style-specific songs; simply reading the text won’t convey the poet’s full intention. The same lyrics performed heavy-metal style or by a Southern Baptist choir will give the audience diverse feelings and generate different meanings. Similarly, in its free-form fluidity, a sound poem allows the poet to transform the sound of his or her voice to reveal to others often-repressed energy existing in the deep wells of feeling within the body—inspirational seeds, emotional twinges, instinctual urges.

Poet/critic Denise Levertov suggests that all good poetry “translates” for the observer a mysterious state of human wakefulness otherwise unexplainable with the formal language that we learn to speak as adults. Word artists—poets—seek to conjure or make palpable what Levertov calls endless “heavens” or “worlds” in our minds—a sort of utopian realm from which emanates the mind’s un-
bound imagination (123). While we rarely consciously discover these “heavens,” the sound poet helps us recover, or perhaps discover, the intricate realities that formal speech and social ‘rules’ of human interaction smother. Poets Hugo Ball and Michael McClure render their interpretations of these “heavens” with two different stylistic approaches to sound poetry: Ball focuses on language itself as a medium to be manipulated, while McClure explores sound poetry’s human innateness. Through both poets’ works, we find the essentiality of the emotional release sound poetry allows. We also discover how this expression joins us with the world at a level that encourages a suppleness of mind and being that readily accommodates change. In this respect, the making and production of a sound poem has social and political ramifications that far exceed its gutural utterance.

Historically, Hugo Ball is at the forefront of the exploration of sound poetry’s significance. He viewed words as complex chunks of meaning, separated vernacular sound symbols into basic units, and rearranged them into his own “words” with his own meanings, void of symbolism. In the early twentieth century, Ball, among other artists, helped establish sound poetry as a legitimate art form by initiating the Dadaist movement of “phonetic” performance poetry. His work emphasizes “the dualism between the soul (the voice) and the world (mechanistic process),” one of these mechanisms being our grammatical form of communication, by which we convey emotion “represented by noises” (“Hugo Ball”). In a recording of an original performance of “Gadji Beri Bimba,” voices groan and chimes tremble, sounding together like a foreign incantation of chanting witches. Overlapping with each other, voices eerily moan in deep vibrato—not what one might expect, having only read the text:

\[
\text{zimzim urullala zimzim urullala zimzim zan-zibar zimzalla zam}
\]
\[
\text{elifantolim brussala bulomen brussala bulomen tromtata}
\]
\[
\text{velo da bang band affalo purzamai affalo purzamai lengado tor}
\]
\[
\text{gadjama bimbalo glandridi glassala zingtata pimpalo ögrögöööö}
\]
\[
\text{viola laxato viola zimbrabim viola uli paluji maloo}
\]

(“Gadji Beri Bimba,” stanza 2)

Without actual words, just the phonetics of the voiced sounds, Ball invokes specific moods in his audience that are inseparable from the sounds themselves.

In another poem, “Totenklage,” Ball verbalizes a different emotional disposition that perhaps best resembles a child crying. Strained moaning conveys the sadness in the sounds of the written “words.” “Tokta tokta takabla” gives us frustrated, sharp strains that push out the sounds. In a fluctuating wail, “Auwa” sounds like “oww.” Then the voice suddenly rushes into a quick rattling off of “bschigi bschigo/ bschigi bschigi” as if the speaker—or the speaker’s soul—is teeth-grittingly angry, but also running out of energy. The voice ends in “goggo googol/ oggo,” trailing off like a baby slowly whimpering itself into calm (“Hugo Ball”). Clearly, this poem could be titled “Process of Toddler Tantrum.” Instead of using descriptive prose, Ball breaks apart and reconfigures language symbols while inducing the same cathartic experience, proving that vernacular semantics are unnecessary for emotional conveyance.

Just as every individual genetically differs, each person expresses emotion or root ideas differently. But no language barriers exist when one does so through uninhibited instinctual sounds. Imagine covering your ears and hearing muffled “growling, hissing, whimpering, cooing, pleading, cajoling, and threatening” between a man and woman (McClure...
Describing sounds of a couples’ argument, Beat poet Michael McClure ignores the connotation and denotation of words, like Ball, and simply addresses “vocalization as sounds” (152). We don’t need to hear the word “angry” to understand a threat or growl; the threat, or the sound’s meaning, lies in the “bio-melodic patterning” of the voice’s sounds: volume, pitch, and variable rhythm (152). Sound poetry utilizes this basic, central supposition of communication. The emotional power of a sound poem lies in sound itself, not in the letters, symbols, words (or non-words), or their arrangement on the page. Without hearing Ball’s poems from start to finish, one misses out on the poem’s meaning because a sound poem must reverberate in the atmosphere and resonate within the auditor.

Through sound poetry, Ball transcends the boundaries of semantics. He allows raw emotional energy to flow through a stream-of-consciousness audible facsimile of speech, a spelling out of sounds as the voice gives feeling an acoustic presence outside the body. Thus, the poem becomes its own living substance to be examined—a kind of epiphenomenon. Modern poet Muriel Rukeyser acknowledged this connection between science and poetry in the 1940s: “Poet, poem, and witness—are none of them static. We are changing, living beings, experiencing the inner change of poetry” (187). She describes the act of reading a poem in tangible terms of motion: wavelengths of rhymes, repetitions, and contrast; the observer’s reaction, measured in “heartbeat and breath” (Rukeyser 183). Similar to Ball’s dissection of speech, Rukeyser’s diction gives her poetry a corporeal element, one constantly changing, as all life forms do.

Rukeyser’s suggestion of poetry’s fluctuating physicality points towards McClure’s exploration of the correlative nature of phonetics and self-expression. While Ball’s poems give the observer an aural experience of an emotional cycle, McClure’s work revolves around the total experience of being a living creature. Critic Rod Phillips tells us McClure desired to “experience the world … on a more instinctual level, as other life forms must” (3). Because, as animals, our lives revolve around maintaining homeostasis within our whole bodies, McClure seeks to emphasize our “creatureliness.” In many of his works, he searches to “reconnect” with the “biological self” that feels the need to fully exhibit his inner “world” externally: “What we truly share with others,” says McClure, “lies in the deepest, most personal, even physiological core” (Phillips 26). To convey this universal component of human life, he developed a poetic speech that speaks to all. He calls it “beast language,” his primitive, elemental stirrings verbalized. Phillips names the language “Mammalian Poetics,” indicative of the animalistic, biological phrasings in McClure’s sound poems, which disengage
from the rational “cerebral trappings”—semantics, logic, rationality—of everyday speech.

In his introduction to Ghost Tantras (1969) McClure asks his audience to encounter his poems as a child would: untutored in grammar and syntax, or as an animal void of logistic ability. He wants his audience to receive and feel with the whole body, not make sense in the brain: “Let the vibrations occur” by not inhibiting the voice with what letters normally sound like, but letting the sounds come out as they please (McClure 1969). Consider these helpful hints when reading a section of his “Lion Poem”:

Gahhhrrr boody eers noze eyes deem thou.
NOH. NAH-OOH
hrooor. VOOOR-NAH! GAHROOOOO ME.

(51)

Like Ball, he plays with sounds in a personalized style, prolonging vowels, rolling Rs, and making animal noises, having tapped into the guttural resources in the depths of consciousness. When listening, one can feel the energy wrought from deep in the poet’s/his own “core.” He invokes rudimentary sounds, those primitive, yet powerful innate noises: growls, cries, coos of a human baby or a lion cub. His “words” consciously allow complete sensory realization of physical existence by making us feel in our gut our oneness with all of nature. In this way, McClure mediates between the world and his own “intense” inner-noise—what he calls the “swirling ball of silence that melds with outer sounds and thought” (qtd. in Kahn 338). In other words, by expressing intrinsic energy, he joins with nature on the most basic level.

McClure’s “swirling ball of silence” is perhaps synonymous with what Levertov calls our “deepest reality” (124). She defines this “place” or substance, as McClure would suggest, as other “worlds” that exist inside us from which emerges our inmost desires and coercive feelings that spur the imagination—our “heavens.” McClure attempts to describe our inner-worlds’ ethereality using constricitive medium of vernacular words. He acknowledges an indefinable element that pervades our thriving subconscious: “We are looking for a point that is both inside of ourselves because we are an organism and outside of ourselves because, as organism, we are created of the environment in an exquisite complex of motions” (51). McClure identifies this place as the “spirit area” and as the birthplace from which poetry arises within us (51). Neither McClure nor Levertov further attempts to explain with words this mysterious “area.” McClure might come closest to capturing this enigmatic “essence” in one of his Ghost Tantras:

Plahn. Plahn drooooo. Dowr mrethreeee.

Where the unspoken voice speaks before the teerze dreep.

Thy message my be. (1969: 59)

Since his purpose is to release in tangible form his “swirling ball of silence,” McClure vocalizes a significant “unspoken” statement by distorting words and phrases. “Teerze dreep” translates to “tears drip.” “Thy message my be” implies “this is my message.” This reorganization, or disorganization, of words is McClure’s message: without obeying language rules, one can successfully convey meaning, perhaps on the deeper, more distinctly instinctual level of “my be.” In a sense, McClure mocks formal conversation conventions while also expanding on the idea that poetry, like nature, is temporal. “The unspoken voice” screams inside of us before “teerze” fall, before we outwardly express emotion. Here, he exercises the process of expression. Since all life exists as process, and poetic expression fuels life, poetry is a process. The energy that fuels his body to emit perturbed growls, lonely moans, and ecstatic whoops is the same energy that propagates all systems of life.
As capable beings, we must propel this process not only to continually renew this energy, but to prohibit creative stagnation. Levertov relates this poignantly vital concept:

If we are to survive ... our own struggle to make it new—a struggle to which I believe we have no choice but to commit ourselves—we need tremendous transfusions of imaginative energy. We need life, and abundantly—we need poems of the spirit, to inform us of the essential, to help us live the great social changes that are necessary, and which must be internal if their external form is to succeed. (Levertov 126-7)

Sound poems are the “tremendous transfusions of imaginative energy” needed to keep artistic expression alive. Make it new, Levertov insists, reitering the credo of her modernist predecessor Ezra Pound. And her dynamic words—transfusions, energy, spirit, inform, live—demand evaluation. She infers movement—physical action—just as McClure advocates organic cycles of poetic expression. A poem, like any living substance, is constantly moving, like vibrations rippling out of the poet in a spherical domino effect. Just as human organ systems are a series of functioning chemical reactions, means to ends, McClure argues that a poem is realized through a series of chemical processes (1982). Like a pebble tossed in a pond, a poem’s energy ripples, transfuses through space causing atomic as well as emotional fluctuation in the atmosphere and audience. In this light, he views poet and poem as fused together as an endless string of chemical reactions in creative process. Once a sound poet vocalizes his or her creation, the ideas transmitted through the air spark emotional, therefore chemical, reactions in the listener. From here, the poem exists in a new form: the reaction manifested in the audience.

It is this series of events and the observers’ responses that spark the “great social change” Levertov demands: the further motivated evolution and transformation of art forms. The inventive stirrings that begin in our “internal” realms must be allowed full range of unrestrained expression for society to healthily advance. Levertov’s stipulation for “tremendous transfusions of imaginative energy” brings us closer to McClure’s argument that poetry is a tangible extension of the body—as important as hands, tongue and feet. And that words are as necessary as breathing (1969: 44). Both life elements are vital to our existence, because both energize the world and demand acknowledgement of one’s being to be included in Earth’s constant transformation. Levertov agrees, in a sense, when she states that “poetry is intrinsically revolutionary, that is, a dynamic force” (128). If we are to experience life at its most plentiful, we must “make it new,” renew and create new “imaginative energy” incessantly. “We have no choice” but to do so, says Levertov, because this rejuvenation is necessary for the survival of the physical “external form” of life we inhabit.

Perpetuated by constantly changing societal opinion and ideology, poetry, like any art, continually develops new configurations. New generations break conventions and reveal previously unimagined aspects of human culture by persistently redefining communication. Sound poetry’s evolution exemplifies this symbiosis between culture and poetry. Each poet discussed here proves this with his or her own oral interpretation of the act of being human. McClure’s ideas echo Ball’s assertion that using pre-defined symbols (words) to represent feeling desiccates an individual’s expressive energy, whether written or spoken. In this view, formal language hinders our ability to give physical form to creative stirrings. This validates sound poetry as a legitimate, powerful art form, unique to humans and our relational communal nature.
Most humans are too shy to experiment with the sounds their own voices can make because they are used to formal language, defined words, structured sentences, and the normal rhythm and tone of conversation. But without acknowledging the range of our voices as instruments, we deny ourselves the freedom of expression we have in our own voice boxes. The human spirit, the “worlds” inside us, needs to be wholly expressed and cannot be regulated by a grammar textbook. Our alphabet—these sound symbols—are also toys to play with, to mix around in order to create new combinations and phrases, like mixing paint to make new colors. If everything were logic and sentences all the time, we would ignorantly bypass awareness of new possibilities in this world, both imagined and real. In order to increase this necessary knowing of the self and society, we need to fully reveal our powerful inner verve, just as we did freely and thoughtlessly as children. We need Levertov’s “poems of the essential,” brought forth from McClure’s too-often-forgotten “swirling ball of silence,” the deeply rooted life force that exists in us all.

Works Cited


