



MediaObject 2

VOICE / PRESENCE / ABSENCE

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READING VOICES: Critical perspectives in contemporary poetry reading

Alessandro Mistrorigo

In the article 'How to read a reading of a written poem', Peter Middleton (2005) lists examples of different styles and presents various problems related to poetry readings as 'events' and 'performances'. In 1994, he had already treated the same topic in his contribution to *Close Listening*, a book edited by the American critic and poet Charles Bernstein, which aimed to 'integrate the modern history of poetry into a more general history of performance art and philosophical and linguistic approaches to the acoustic dimension of language' (Bernstein 1998, p. 5). The book brings together more than fifteen articles about several topics related to poetry readings and their performative dimension, text-based visual and conceptual art, and visual poetry.

Bernstein's book is an inspiring work for someone who studies a specific author's reading style or a particular poet's delivery. Since 2010, I have been working on the Spanish poets Claudio Rodríguez and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, focusing on the way they read a number of their published poems. Relying on online recordings and other digital or analogical resources, initially I critically approached their *voices* in the act of reading, as well as the *tension* between written and vocal versions of some specific poetic texts. Soon my focus shifted from this specific approach to the criteria or tools that enable a critical interpretation of poetry based on 'voice matter': critically listening to poets' reading their poems poses a series of problems and questions directly



'voice matter': critically listening to poets' reading their poems poses a series of problems and questions directly linked to both texts and creative practice and the idea of *author* and/or *authorship*.

VOICE, BODY, TEXT.

In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Malden Dolar talks about human voice as an object detached both from language and body. Voice comes from the body, from its inside, says Dolar, as an *acousmatic* phenomenon, whose originating spot is impossible to determine; it gives sound to language but belongs neither to body nor to language (Dolar 2004, p. 72-73). In Dolar's words:

'voice stands at a paradoxical and ambiguous topological spot, at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither. *What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor the body.* The voice stems from the body, but is not its part, and it upholds language without belonging to it'. (Dolar 2004, p. 73)

By being a different thing, it places itself in a empty space between body and language in a mode that Giorgio Agamben (1996, p. 77) would say, *articulates* 'life and language'.

Coming from the concept of *acousmatic* voice, Dolar's reasoning identifies the paradoxical nature of human voice and goes in the direction of a Lacanian *objet petit a*, which is seen as an intersection between the circle of the language and the circle of the body. Therefore, '[i]n order to conceive the voice as the object of the drive, we must divorce it from the empirical voice that can be heard. Inside the heard voices in an unheard voice, an aphonic voice, as it were' (Dolar 2004, p. 73). Nevertheless, if voice – as a human gesture¹ – is that particular way in which a precise transitory acoustic form is given to a portion of language – expressing itself as an *event*, as a presence/absence – by a specific body, an individual human being; then it wouldn't make much sense to detach the empirical human voice – the concrete articulation of that specific acoustic form – of that specific individual body from the same individuality that articulates it. On the contrary, it would be of more interest to look for the way in which that specific voice links (*emptily*) body and language in the discourse of that particular individuality.

Quoting Calvino's short story *Un re in ascolto*, the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005, p. 3) states that 'The voice, however, is always different from all other voices, even if the words are the same'. This diversity



that 'The voice, however, is always different from all other voices, even if the words are the same'. This diversity has to do with the specificity of an individual body. Furthermore, what human voice expresses, says Cavarero, is precisely the uniqueness of that specific body that emits it, in the same way each unique body always charges its discourse with its uniqueness itself. In addition to this, Cavarero (2005, p. 10) also puts in evidence how studies on orality demonstrate that poetry – in its epic form, but not just – is that particular discourse where human voice is the ruling groove.

Experienced within voice as a particular mode of language, poetry links an individual body and its language in a specific way that is also deeply related to creativity. The perfect example here is of babies during the babbling period². They are still not able to produce a properly meaningful sound and yet they are continuously experimenting with their voice, creating sounds, mimicking the parent's phonetic chains. I am referring here, through Cavarero, to a Nietzschean tradition of thinking the experience of acoustic pleasure, developed by Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Children's vocality is here an extraordinary example of what Kristeva (2006, p. 28) calls *semiotic chora*. This is the preverbal and unconscious 'matter' – the term *chora* comes from Plato's *Timeo* and is deeply linked to the 'mother' element – which the language that any specific individual uses is made from. In this sense, as intended by Kristeva, the *semiotic chora* is deeply rooted in the body, its flesh and uniqueness, as well as in life experience. Nobody loses it completely when language is fully acquired.

In fact, we are always in touch with the *phonic* part of the language we use, both consciously and unconsciously. When we are speaking, phonic drives are always working in the space created by our voice. By phonic drives I am not just thinking about Freudian's slips of the tongue or other pathological or traumatic aspects of language – which could or should be considered anyway –; but also of all those acoustic features related to resonance, sonority, echo, homonymy, repetition, etc. as well as timbre, volume, speed, pitch, etc. that characterise a individual specific emission. All those aspects make a specific human voice distinctive, unique, and therefore related to the uniqueness of the body that emits it. Lacan himself (1978, p. 321) says that as we speak the linguistic structure has to take form, passing through the human voice, which means having to pass across the corporeal cavities that keep us alive– and so having to assume their inner rhythm, their full/empty or sound/silence inner pattern.

Here I am referring to the individual's musicality that influences, breaks and reorganises the meaning of what Kristeva calls 'text' – widely intended as 'language' itself (Cavarero 2008, p. 148). In this sense, when a specific poetic text is *vocalised* by its author, we have access to an excellent example of the 'close' dynamics that articulate a quite specific portion of language organized in a particular way and a specific individual's musicality. In fact, when an author reads one of her/his poems aloud, the written text is given a specific acoustic



musically. In fact, when an author reads one of her/his poems aloud, the written text is given a specific acoustic form through the gesture of the voice that emerges from the individual that produced it. The bond between that particular individual that is articulating through his/her own voice-gesture a specific text, and the text itself is quite unique, and under these conditions, the author's acoustic expression or performance – her/his voice *vocalising* a specific text of hers/his – could have a crucial role in understanding that specific text – as well as perhaps her/his creative practice and poetic work. Dolar himself (2004, p. 14) says that 'voice is an opening toward meaning'; why not use authors' voices performing their texts to open up other paths of interpretation?

RECORDINGS, LISTENING, SUBJECT.

Recordings, as audible objects in which poets read aloud their own poems, are common items and nowadays we can find them very easily; mostly online as audio (or video) files – or downloadable as podcasts – as well as on physical supports like CDs or DVDs. Twenty years ago, Paul Zumthor had already noticed how the poet's voice reaches us filtered by *media* (Bologna 1992, p. 11) – at that time he was referring mainly to vinyl, CD and music cassette. In opposition to a poet's live performance in oral cultures, Zumthor also observed how recorded voice (which he defines as 'secondary orality') was totally impersonal due to its repeatability and the missing presence of its author. The only thing that remains, he stated, is the echo of his voice (Bologna 1992, p. 11). Like in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* then, voice recordings would be an echo without body and a sort of sound reflexion (or a *backwash*) of a past presence that can be repeated infinite times. However, far from being the cold repetition of an impersonal voice, as the Italian critic and writer Claudio Magris shows in his *Le voci* (1995), repeatability has more to do with the presence of the *listener* than the author; the listener makes the same recording different every time it is played – in the same way that a reader (or a critic) does with a text.

Recordings are fairly stable cultural objects, very much comparable to a book and suitable for interpretation, especially in relation to the published text to which they refer. Talking about listening and the sonorous word that comes from inside the person who speaks, Roland Barthes (Barthes & Havas 1982, p. 987) stated that voice is related to the silence as the writing is to the white page. Moreover, Barthes continues, saying that voice always reveals the way of being, the joy or the pain, how people are; voice transmits an image of their body, and beyond it, all their psychological state of being. Vocal expression indeed transmits an image of the specific individual body that emits it. In my personal experience, I have never found the voices of the poets I have been studying and listening to, impersonal. Moreover, I have become aware that listening itself is a



reflective action that acts not only on the passive or critical listener, but also on the person who speaks.

In his *À l'écoute*, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2004, p. 7) describes the practice of listening as a 'philosophical ear' stretching to catch the tone, the timbre and the resonance of sound. Following Nancy's analysis, listening gives us back to the presence of sound that *comes* and *goes*, that *spreads* itself in the air and *penetrates* us while our subjects are permanently open in the openness of space and time precisely created by sound (or voice) itself. In this open void, present in space and time, sound creates connections and consonances that the listening subject has to 'tune up' with in order to find its meaningful interpretation of the acoustic phenomena (Nancy 2004, p. XXI). In this sense, the listening subject assumes the features of a *diapason-subject*, permanently tuning up with the sonorous world around – as well as with voice, both our own and the other's.

Each of us always behaves as a *diapason-subject*; we are always listening to sounds and to the sound of others' voices as well as our own; we are always exposed to what the sound of these voices brings to us:

There is a too-much of the voice in the exterior because of the direct transition into the interior, without defence; and there is a too-much of the voice stemming from the inside – it brings out more, and other things, than one would intend. *One is too exposed to the voice and the voice exposes too much, one incorporates and one expels too much.* (Dolar 2004, p. 81)

Voice – our own as well as other's – is always charged with that *too much* that we should be able to chase and interpret as diapason-subjects; especially if that voice *evokes* – from Latin *ex*, 'out', and *vocare*, 'call'; literally 'to call out' – a poetic text.

With regard to our own voice, and specifically a voice belonging to a poet, Nancy (2004, p. 56) quotes the French poet Francis Ponge, who says that not just every single poem he writes, but every single text implies its *diction*. This means, explains Ponge, that his own writing is always accompanied with a mental listening – even if it is not preceded by it. *Diction* and listening – they seem to be inseparable for the French poet – work as a reflexive echo of the text, in which the same text unfolds and writes itself, opening up to its own meaning as well as to the plurality of other possible meanings.

Following Ponge, a poetic text seems to be the result of the complex action of a subject who speaks and listens to her/his own voice at the same time. In the same act of poetic creation there is the empty space for the articulation of an echo, the (re)flexibility of a diapason-subject speaking closely to itself. The 'subject has to deliver the statement and thus assume the enunciation, respond to it' (Dolar 2004, p. 98); the poet's diapason-

deliver the statement and thus assume the enunciation, respond to it (Dolar 2004, p. 30), the poet's diapausic subject has to respond to the silent *epoké* of experience with language as well as with voice, with her/his poetical voice as well as the individual and physical one. The first might find its definite form in the written text, in a published work such as a book, while the second – which most often comes first – has to always find its expression, time after time, in that acoustic 'matter' that Kristeva calls *chora*, which is the author's individual and physical voice: 'Only the voice implies a subjectivity which 'expresses itself' and itself inhabits the means of expression' (Dolar 2004, p. 15).

POETS, PERFORMANCE, PERSPECTIVE.

As Peter Middleton (2005, p. 14) notes, 'poets are *not* usually trained performers able to project and control their voices like actors, and usually do not want to appear too slickly professional. But these imperfections are not really flaws at all, as poetry is vocalized amid this resistance to its command [...]'. Similarly, Charles Bernstein is clear in saying that

[a]n actor's rendition, like a type designer's 'original' setting of a classic, will not have the same kind of authority as a poet's own reading or the first printing of the work. But the performance of the poet, just as the visualisation of the poem in its initial printing, forever marks the poem's entry into the world; and not only its meaning, its existence. (Bernstein 1998, p. 8-9)

When I began to listen to Spanish poets reading aloud their poems from several recordings, I had their books opened in front of my eyes and I naturally started to track their voices down the pages, to follow their *movements*. I soon noticed – as everybody would have – that some poets read their poems 'very well' (as a common assumption this means interpreting exactly what is written on the page), while others completely changed the structure of their compositions by using a different sequence of enjambments and *caesurae* (or pauses). In a recent article (Mistrorigo 2012), I have considered the case of Claudio Rodríguez reading his poem 'Alto jornal', a very regular composition with 16 hendecasyllables. However, under the voice action of the author the lines of the text literally *move* on the page in a very irregular way showing a completely different sequence of enjambments and *caesurae*.

The author's voice always impresses a *prosodic movement* on the text and her/his delivering *re-creates*



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and re-structures it. *Enjambment* and *caesura* are basic structural elements of poetic language. In poetry, the metric limit is the line and *enjambment* goes beyond this limit by jumping on the next line. We listen to an *enjambment* when the voice does not stop at the end of the line but flows into the following one. *Enjambment* is the momentum of physical voice expressing itself, it is voice as utterance – or ‘the horse of poetry’ as in Origen’s metaphor, discussed by Agamben in *Idea della prosa* (2002). On the other side, *pause* is the silence of verse: *caesura* is what stops that physical voice and gives it its time, its rhythm and pace. Poetry is indeed built on this tension.

In the practice of writing, the author needs to work out and organise – among other elements – this structural tension in order to achieve a fully poetical text. In this game of creation (or creative mode), voice has a crucial role in poets like Ponge. If we accept that poetry arrives as a response out of the silent existence of the author, we might agree that the same response, as Barthes would say, is articulated by a voice that assumes in itself the ‘grain’ of the speaker – who’s now also an author. Voice articulates itself as an event in the way that literally indicates a ‘coming out’ – from Latin *ex-venire* – of an interiority that emerges to the surface: it is the subject that comes to the surface when speaking (Zatti 2003, p. 18). Since voice is always charged with an *emotional colour* – it is simultaneously verbal and non-verbal communication, and it might be possible to fully *perceive* this colour – to describe and study it – within the prosodic movement given by a specific author’s voice when reading aloud.

By using this author’s voice as a key hermeneutical concept, I have been targeting what stretches and keeps vocal and written versions of the same composition together – keeping in mind that there are specific author’s voice renditions of the same text. As in any other kind of performance, a reading of a poem is always different – and we can have different recordings of the same text. This is the case with Rodríguez’s poem ‘Siempre la claridad viene del cielo’ (Mistrorigo 2012). In this case, we have two different recordings that show how the poet’s delivery changed the text from the first to the second reading. When we listen to the first recording, we notice that the text changes in a considerable way. This reading comes in a CD included in *La voz de Claudio Rodríguez*, a book published in 2003 by Residencia de Estudiantes within the collection ‘Poesía en la Residencia’. The reading took place on 22nd November 1989, when Rodríguez gave a speech and read a selection of his poems. The sound quality is good and his voice is clearly audible. The second recording is included in a CD that comes with the book titled *Antología personal* published by Visor in 1996. Here there is no mention of when, where or how Rodríguez was recorded, the sound quality is poor, and the poet’s voice sounds as if it was far from the microphone clouded by background noise. However, it is possible to understand the prosodic movement of author’s voice.



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The two vocal versions are quite different and yet it is possible to recognise some similarities; points at which the author reads in exactly the same way. The entire first line and the first hemistich of the second one – ‘Siempre la claridad viene del cielo; I es un don: I’ – are both read in the same way, with the same pauses. While in the first recording Rodríguez’s voice is quicker than in the second and they have a similar rendition of line 7, first hemistich, ‘Y esto es un don.’ which is followed by a long pause. Later, there are two questions, which are read in exactly the same way specifically emphasising the syntactic meaning instead of the metric one. Another point in which the two versions come together is line 17, an hendecasyllable divided in two by a long caesura: ‘Como yo, Il como todo lo que espera. Il’. This transmits the dramatic sense of the words; the same kind of dramatic impression that we find at the end of the poem – again an hendecasyllable read at the same speed and in the same way: ‘pero abrazo hasta el fin I que nunca afloja. Il’.

The movement that voice transmits to the text sometimes goes to the level of altering words or repeating parts of the same line. When major changes are audible in the delivery and vocal versions differ to a great extent from the published text, it might be because the author is reading a different written version. In this case, as Corrado Bologna in his *Fatus vocis* suggests, a proper textual critique might be needed:

Philology will have to take into account, perhaps, in the future, the *textus ne varietur* established ‘by the voice’, on tape, by the author himself (it is Ungaretti’s case as well as many others’). For the first time, the ‘living voice’ of a poet may be called to bear witness to the original intention, in the textual criticism process; and on the other hand, hasn’t the phonograph already defined a shift in favour of vocal *auctoritas*, compared to the telegraph, whose message – not the vibration of voice, but its transcription – threw at distance? (Bologna 1992, p. 133).

‘Ante una pared de adobe’ by Claudio Rodríguez was published in the previously mentioned Visor’s *Antología personal*. As said, the publisher does not give any information about the conditions under which the recording was made but the written text published in the book presents some incongruences with its own CD’s vocal execution. The poet’s voice follows the canonical version and yet his voice says something different at the line 12: ‘buscando techo. Si tú, que va a dármelo’ on the page becomes ‘buscando techo. Oh tú, que va a dármelo’. In this case, even though we can discharge the text published by Visor as a mistake (the book is full of typos), we cannot dismiss as completely insignificant the vocal version in relation to the canonical text even though it is *only* a syllable – a hypothetical ‘Si’ (‘if’) changes to the exclamation ‘Oh’. This change does not intervene in the metrical sequence of the verse, but in its syntax – in its linguistic meaning. A good example in

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this sense is Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, another Spanish poet who was recorded reading aloud his poems, in a 15 minute documentary dedicated to him by TVE (2009).

Filmed in 1989, this video is quite simple: it shows Vázquez Montalbán reading his poems while wandering alone in between the chimneystacks of *La Pedrera's* roof in Barcelona. On this occasion, he read 10 poems of his, some quite old and a couple of them contemporary to the documentary. Montalbán reads in a very different way from Rodríguez; he is much more respectful of the written text. However, Montalbán's voice also presents us with some changes. In '¡No corras papá!' as well as in the second fragment of *Praga*, Vázquez Montalbán's voice 'forgets' some words – he does not respect the *repetition* that of the written text, which seems to acquire a too dramatic effect when read out loud.

'¡No corras papá!'	v. 49:	'no, no' (text) > 'no' (voice)
'Lejos de mí tan lejos'	v. 1: '	Lejos de mí tan lejos' (text) > 'Tan lejos' (voice)

In 'Muerte en el agua', Montalbán's voice changes a preposition:

v. 9:	'entre putrefacciones y muertes aplazadas' (text) > 'sobre putrefacciones y muertes aplazadas' (voice)
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At the level of textual critique, we are facing a different version *from* and, at the same time, *of* the published text; but not even the most remarkable one. In the poem 'La modernidad adosó un squash', there are a lot more changes that do not belong to any written published version of that poem. In another article (Mistrorigo 2013) I demonstrate how the vocal version we are listening to in this TVE documentary is not the final version of the poem, but the *evocation* of a version still *in progress*. Like a manuscript, this vocal version gives us an insight of Montalbán's creative process.

DELIVERING, AUTHOR, BODY.

Montalbán's personal way of delivering a text – his *delivering design* –, is free from those conventions that a professional style would regard as important or even indispensable, and inaugurates a set of prosodic relations



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with the authorship of the text. Beyond the movement of fundamental elements as enjambments and pauses; in a reading voice we can identify elements such as rhythm and intensity, tone, pace and other physical qualities that vary in a meaningful way, adding new texture to the text. It is of course possible to measure and establish useable quantitative acoustic analyses of these qualities – either for clinical and therapeutical reasons or technological applications. Loudness, pitch and quality are widely used to describe essential aspects of a speaker's voice. These data as well as sound visualisation can be used to help listeners, by making evident specific characteristics of a particular author's voice while delivering one of her/his compositions. Starting from a cognitive approach, Reuven Tsur (2012) has already shown how it is possible to use these tools in order to study voice, delivery, structure and performance in poetry.

However, describing a specific author's delivering design is always an hermeneutical exercise. Interpreting a specific voice is first of all listening to it: 'in the beginning was a voice. In the beginning of psychoanalysis that is, for the voice is a prime candidate for genesis of all sorts – the creation of the universe to start with [...]' (Dolar 2006, p. 128). Indeed the voice is the prime generating matter of the universe, the prime sparkle is in God's fiat lux. The same sparkle is in every single voice that a subject articulates; and voice has very much to do with subjects and their building. Referring to the *Psychopathologies of Everyday Life*, Dolar states: 'If the unconscious can be unfolded, this is only because it speaks, its voice can be heard [...]' (2006, p. 130). Psychoanalysts like Alberto Zatti and Gianna Giuliani have pointed out the importance of *not just hearing*, but of *properly listening* to the patient's voice in the therapy scenario. Listening skills should be refined in order to collect all information that voice conveys and could be crucial for treatment. In a similar way, literary critics should refine their listening skills in approaching poets' voices in order to look for information that would allow an understanding of how voice interacts with poetic language on a specific poet's writing practice.

By actively listening to specific delivering designs, it might be possible to translate *timbre* in emotions in the same way in which we consider a specific author's style; if Jacques Derrida noticed the parallelism between style and voice in an author, Ivan Fonágy proved that in voice *timbre* the most intimate and deepest conditions of 'vocal body' are hidden, showing that each emotion corresponds to a *timbre*/musical level. In other words, we could already transcribe on a pentagram joy, sadness, jealousy, coquetry, sarcasm, disappointment, etc. (Bologna 1992, p. 93-94). Voice goes behind words and somehow reveals the truth of human soul (Bologna 1992, p. 52); in the same way that what speaks in a human being goes far beyond the words he says, and penetrates his dreams, his essence and his own biological organism (Bologna 1992, p. 65), and this is particularly clear when the poetic language is in process.



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