

. . . *sound* . . . *shape* . . . *meaning* . . .

What is the shape of reading, the sound of a text as I read with the eye or the lips? How do I know the text—words on the page, words in the air? What is that arrangement of language on the two-dimensional page, the sculpture of sound in air? What is the meaning of sound in poetry? What is the relation between sound and meaning, sound and the visual shape of the poem on the page? How, in Zukofsky's

poetics—

music
∫
speech

An integral
Lower limit speech
Upper limit music

—is music the “upper limit” of writing, speech its “lower limit”?

Listening to Reading is about writing as an act of the mind playing with words across time and space that separates and connects them: the sound of words as memory (echo) of their physical shape, which is itself a memory (echo) of sound: the sound/shape of words and the world we know in words—words on the page (seen by the eye), words in the air (heard by the ear): dimension of letters on the page and in the air: weight of words as sound or silence waiting to become sound.

The essays that follow offer a critical and performative presentation of “experimental” writing—“avant-garde,” “postmodern,” “innovative,” “language writing”: I am less concerned with labels than with asking how this writing works, how it invites us to read—from Mallarmé, Stein, and Cage to books published in the '80s and '90s by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, David Bromige, Clark Coolidge, Beverly Dahlen, Michael Davidson, Larry Eigner, Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian, Paul Hoover, Susan Howe, Ron Padgett, Michael Palmer, and Leslie Scalapino—writers whose work is viewed as difficult, ostensibly inaccessible, and has as yet been largely ignored by criticism.¹ My assumptions are (1) that the sound of a poem's words and their visual shape on the page are *interconnected*: that the sound of words is, literally, an acoustic shape (the shape of words in air), their shape literally a visual sound (letters waiting to become sound); (2) that meaning in poetry exists only in relation to sound (music/silence) and visual shape—that sound/shape articulates (and creates) meaning; (3) that the poem is less a representation/evidence/likeness of the world than its sound (echo), an event in which the world takes further shape; and (4) that the traditional border between criticism and theory and poetry is necessarily restrictive and may

be usefully transcribed by a writing that “listens” to reading (i.e., that itself articulates/enacts the role that sound/shape plays in the composition, and also the perception, of poetry). In testing these premises, I will demonstrate and question how the poetics that are my subject might be read.

The book presents two different kinds of writing about poetry—critical analysis and performance—both of which pay particular attention to sound, shape, and the relation of sound/shape to meaning. The two kinds of writing alternate with each other (analysis, performance, analysis, performance, and so on) in order to suggest the “conversation” between them: readings whose purpose is to “explain” the writing that is their subject punctuated by “readings” whose purpose is to perform/demonstrate that writing by doing/enacting it. The reader will be able to experience, and distinguish between, these contrapuntal forms of writing: *analytic close reading* and *reading-as-writing-itself*—writing that in listening to reading engages its subject on, and in, its own terms.

“The Asymptote of Elsewhere,” for example, which asks how writing and reading interact, lays out the ground upon which my reading/writing has been built; “Writing [Echoes] Writing” examines the intertextual nature of writing-as-memory/echo/quotation, writing that attempts to write the world but can’t, and the strategies concomitant with that circumstance; and “Memo/ Re: Reading Stein” (on Stein’s early works), “Writing/ Re: Memory” (on Lyn Hejinian) and “Listening to Reading” itself (on Leslie Scalapino) are critical/expository pieces in which I think about how to read Stein, Hejinian and Scalapino. Alternatively, “Con()Text” is an epigraph whose fifty parts “score” the white (silence/music) space of the empty, two-dimensional page with a series of “sound bytes” that will map the contextual landscape of the writing that is my subject; “Signature”—a poem/essay of memory, sound, echo, and counting—performs the writing I mean to explore; “Idea’s Mirror” (on Susan Howe) and “Reading *Sun*” (on Michael Palmer)—whose two “voices,” registered in roman and italics, interact and subordinate: reader interacting with writer, reading with writing; reader subordinate to writer, reading to writing, the roman voice (mine) to the italicized one (Howe or Palmer’s)—are “close reading” for the initiate, writing that will demonstrate the intertextuality of writing itself; and “The Landscape (Body) of the Poem,” a prose poem that is also criticism, closes my reading by returning to the sound of the world in words.

Inviting a full engagement from the reader even as it *itself* enacts such a response, the writing in these performative pieces challenges the reader to redefine his or her role (*as reader/listener*) in reading a text. It has permitted me “to say what I [have] to say,” as John Cage puts it, “in a way that [will] exemplify it; that [will], conceivably, permit the listener to experience what I [have] to say rather than just hear about it.”² It will also allow me to demonstrate correspondences between the poetics that are my subject and the sorts of critical claims—about writing, reading, and the alphabet—that might be made about such poetics; demonstrate how poetry and critical discourse interconnect, how writing *of* a given discourse is inextricably bound up with writing *in* a given discourse. Although admittedly difficult, this writing is also essential to the scheme of the book because it is an extension of the writing that is my subject: writing that is itself listening to reading.

Before I begin, some preliminary remarks about the relations between music (sound/silence), shape, meaning, and the written text in poetry. Sound in poetry may be thought of as dimension: the *acoustic* dimension, given that the text itself (letters spelled into words, “scored” with marks of punctuation) exists on the page in two *visual* dimensions—the horizontal axis of letters, syllables, words, spaces, the line; the vertical axis of a sequence of lines running down the page.³ Whereas its sound (the sound of letters, syllables, words, lines) realizes, when the poem is read aloud (heard by reader/listener), a third dimension, which brings the two-dimensional text fully into the world: as articulated acoustic shape (sound-as-shape, the shape of the poem in the air/ear)—a shape that, until the poem on the page is read aloud, exists only in potential, as Olson suggests when he writes, “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader”⁴—reader who will, in hearing it, complete the circuit. Reading aloud, and listening to reading, is crucial to this realization.

Words read with the eye only, in private reading experience, register only part of the poem’s reality/being (presence). Full presence, in the present, becomes realized only when *poem enters ear: through air, as words read aloud*. When we read the poem silently, with eyes (but not ears), we think semantic meaning is the key: “She sang beyond the genius of the sea.” But to ask, What does Stevens mean here? is to miss the point; whereas, if we truly “listen” to reading we will experience the poem in its full three dimensions, as both visual text and sonic text, words on page *and* in air. So that we *hear* (here) four long *e* sounds (“She,” “ge-” “-nius,” “sea”), four *s* sounds (“She,” “sang,” “genius,” “sea”)—*hear* in other words the poem’s articulation of acoustic shape—what the poet in writing *made* (shaped) on the page, going back to the root meaning of *poein*, to make, poet-as-maker.

Take the last line of Keats’s “To Autumn” (“And gathering swallows twitter in the skies”) for example—echoed at the end of Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings

—sound in poem meaning to *enact* sound in world; beauty of world’s sound (which poem “refers” to: *gathering swallows twitter in the skies*) registered (in words) as the sound the poet perceives in the world. Meaning can’t be extracted (as “ideas”) from the poem, as critics who write about poetry as if it were *only* (or simply) “ideas” tend to do⁵ (I am thinking of the story about Degas, who said to his friend Valéry, “I am so full of ideas but can’t write a poem!” to which Valéry replied, “But my dear Degas, poetry is made out of words, not ideas!”). Nor is the poem’s meaning simply its “content” (“Content *never* equals meaning”⁶), its “knowledge” (“Knowledge is not *translated* into words when it is expressed. The words are not a translation of something else that was there before they were”⁷) or its “representation of the world” (“the essence of which Schönberg summed up in the statement that the painter paints a pic-

ture rather than what it represents⁸). Rather, as meaning(s) in the world can be “read” from their sounds and shapes (“world as text,” “life an open book”), the meaning of the poem *is* sound/shape—is known (seen/heard) as a complex of extended meaning (“signification” + sound + shape): *sound (shape) as thought*, to think in words being to think in shape and sound.

The sound/shape of words is not meaning, but *means*—what the ear hears (listening), eye sees (reading). As Vygotsky writes, “A word without meaning is an empty sound⁹—an absence of acoustic shape. Shape as such (of letters, of words) being fully significant, the poem without sound makes no “sense” except as something other than what it is: letters on the page waiting to be read. Read aloud, words produce sound: sound a product of visual shape, which sound itself also produces. If one doesn’t listen to reading, one can’t hear what’s going on in a poem’s third dimension: if the tree falls in the forest (nobody around?), does it make a sound? Perhaps, or perhaps not, depending on the position of the perceiver, but given that the poem *is* made of words rather than ideas, concepts, knowledge, or representation of the world, those words—once they are read, at least—have/make sound of their own that *can* be heard, as Stein implies when she writes (on Matisse), “Some were listening again and again to this one telling about this one being one being in living.”¹⁰

(Words printed on the page [“locked” in print] are like offstage actions an audience must imagine in a play: Ophelia’s drowning in the stream, Hamlet’s father’s death-by-poison in the orchard—action we hear about in words but don’t see performed physically on stage; actions that don’t actually take place *in* the play except in the words used to “perform” them—words spoken by the actress playing Gertrude, actor playing the Ghost. Similarly, words *not* read aloud—not spoken—and so *not* heard, fail to deliver what’s going on in the poem—or deliver, rather, *only* its physical shape on the page, and whatever substance, syntax, image, symbol might be drawn from that. Not in any case sound, the offstage *action* of sound which in a poem gets realized/enacted only when words enter the air/ear.)

The sound of words is a memory (echo) of their physical shape—shape of letters printed or drawn, of spaces between them; shape itself a memory (echo) of their sound (what is spoken sounds like “t-h-i-s”). What we notice in listening to reading is the actual, material “stuff” of language, which in fact we hardly notice at all, given that we tend to think the purpose of language is to “communicate.” Hence the reason unnoticed effects are more effective, in poetry at least, than noticed ones: what we don’t notice—the visual/acoustic shape of letters, spaces, words, lines—in reading or listening to reading is exactly what delivers the things we do—image, metaphor, symbol, and so on. Readers of the visual text, as well as listeners to the acoustic one, generally pay attention to the “message” (what the writer means to say), as if the sound and shape of the words themselves don’t matter or count—which of course they do.

Let me spell out directly, then, the ground upon which the essays in *Listening to Reading* are built:

1. Listening to the rhythm/syntax of experience, the poet “hears” the world, which is transcribed in the words of the poem: “A sentence has been heard,” as Stein writes, “[n]ow listen.”¹¹

2. In writing experience down (in words), the poet reaches out beyond herself toward an audience—the “addressee” of Kristeva’s second dimension, those “strangers” to whom Stein refers when she says, “I write for myself and strangers”¹²—who in reading will see/hear the shape/sound of those words on the page, in the air.
3. The visual shape of the poem enacts—and is enacted by—its acoustic shape: the shape that fills the air/ear, once the poem is read aloud and heard, *as sound*; as Zukofsky writes, “In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound.”¹³
4. Made present by such enactment (perceived by the reader’s eye as words-on-the-page, by the listener’s ear as words-in-the-air), the poem’s meaning does not exist separately from its visual/acoustic identity; to paraphrase Zukofsky, the visual/acoustic shape of the poem—on the page, in the air—is never apart from its meaning¹⁴.
5. The reader/listener will, in that perception of the text, come to know and appreciate the aesthetic object, “there being some connection between liking and listening,” as Stein says.¹⁵
6. Close reading of the text can lead to fuller understanding of how its words work to create meaning—how words echo the sound of the world; how, as Vygotsky puts it, “[b]ehind words . . . the independent grammar of thought, the syntax of word meaning”¹⁶ registers the poet’s experience of that world, reflects that world’s syntax as the poet “reads” it.
7. “Listening to reading” gives *access* to that experience/meaning—of words *and* world—made present in the poem’s words, as Heidegger suggests when he writes, “What is present comes to presence . . . along . . . lines of usage . . . enjoining and preserving . . . what is present”¹⁷ (i.e., *in words*, as echo/enactment/memory *of* world, the relation between the *written text* [visual shape] and its *music* [sound/silence, shape-in-air] being the *site* of its meaning).

Exploring the ground of this poetics, the essays that follow will explore how the poetics that are my subject might as I say be read.