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AURAL/ORAL SONNETS OF TED BERRIGAN

I wanted to provide in *The Sonnets* a lot of material for footnotes so that scholars for one thousand years could check everything out.

— Ted Berrigan

Abstract: The present paper attempts to investigate the problem of interaction of the visual and sound dominants in the composition of a canonical now cycle of *The Sonnets* created by Ted Berrigan—an American poet of the second generation of New York Poets. The topic is all the more interesting as the sonnet as a poetic form represents a *closed form* which by definition foregrounds shape and pattern rather than sound. Berrigan's uniqueness of technique bridges the two extremes of representation by disintegrating the rigid structure of the sonnet and allows the poet to build the poems not out of the blocks of three/four/six/eight line stanzas but out of a single unit of a one line stanza. They undergo, in turn, a dynamic process of random permutations in keeping with theories of aleatory music and collage composition. Furthermore, Berrigan supplements the visual dominant with language substance of colloquial American speech which is "overheard," appropriated and variously recycled in successive poems. Both theoretical comments of Berrigan and the poems he included in the sequence confirm the centrality of aural/oral dimension of his sonnets.

Key words: Ted Berrigan; the sonnet; poetics; sound in poetry; visual poetry; American literature; language in literature.

Poetry has always been a melic form and as such it has creatively incorporated sound as one of its major organizing principles. Chanted, sung, recited or whispered, poetry is poetry because it organizes sound units of which it is made into this peculiar melody of vowels and consonants enhanced in the process by rhythmical patterns and melody.

Yet, there are poetic forms which evolved in the long process of literary evolution in which the visual element became as important as the auditory

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one. In other words, there are types of verse in which the shape of the poem and its structural elements of stanzaic arrangement determine the specificity of the form. Undoubtedly, the sonnet is a fine instance of such poetry. Originally created in the thirteenth century by an Italian poet Giacomo da Lentini, the sonnet captures the attention of poets with its cage-like structure of fourteen lines arranged variously into quatrains, tercets, octaves, sestet and couplets depending on the type of the form chosen by a poet. No matter whether Petrarchan, Spenserian or Shakespearian, the sonnet is made up of blocks of verses which need to be filled in with words of a finite number of syllables, preferably decasyllabic iambic pentameter in length and rhythm. A thought or an idea becomes, as it were, encapsulated in a verbal cage of an octave or three quatrains and eventually set free after the *volta* in a sestet or a final punchline couplet. Although initially the sonnet was restricted to the poet's evocations of his infatuation with his *donna angelicata*, with time it became a vehicle for expression of virtually any emotion, opinion or argument. However, it was the formal axiom of structural shape and pattern which was the major criterion determining the generic status of the poem, its sonneticity.¹ Admittedly, the sonnet supplemented this verbal structure with musical embellishments, most characteristically in the form of elaborate rhyming patterns. To use biological nomenclature, it seems that the sonnet's genotype embodies in its DNA particles of genetic substance of other arts, be it visual or musical sculpture/painting or its more contemporary forms like photography or film.

It is no wonder, therefore, that one of the most interesting aspects of the study of evolution of the sonnet is an investigation of its interactions with other forms of art and human activity at large. Especially starting with the beginning of the twentieth century, the sonnet incorporated, as it were, into its structure the forms and techniques of the visual arts in particular. It is not surprising on two grounds: Firstly, the Modernist avant-garde experiments of the visual artists of the early decades of the previous century influenced literature most intensely with their new Post-Impressionist and Cubist aesthetics. Secondly, it is due to the already noticed "spatial" form of the sonnet demarcated by its characteristic blocks of lines grouped into "cubes" or "slabs" of words.

¹ For more advanced contemporary experiments with the shape and size of the sonnet see my paper: "Super size me: Experiments with the shape and size of contemporary sonnets in English" in Waćcior 2016.

The poet who authored such hybrid-poems was Ted Berrigan. Berrigan was an American poet of two dozen collections of poems and the author of “The Sonnets”, a cycle of poems he published in the early 60’s of the twentieth century. As he combined the visual and the sonic element of his sonnets in an attempt to render the complexity of modern communication and give voice to the mid-twentieth century America, I will try in this paper to investigate this fascinating interaction of the visual and auditory elements of Berrigan’s sonnets with special attention placed on the aural/oral effects incorporated in them.

In the present study of sensory mutations of modern sonnets, it is the sound and its auditory effect which I would like to emphasize in Berrigan’s poetics of composition. His sonnets have been “made” **by ear**, the ear of a modern American man, saturated in the culture and arts of the 60’s of the twentieth century. The sounds and rhythms of the vernacular language, combined with the people he lived with and places he knew and lived in, make up the raw substance of his experimental sonnets. Yet, because this language is used, and re-used often in a random, musically aleatory fashion – the method Berrigan knew from his interest in John Cage’s sound experiments – they lose their semantic load and function predominantly at auditory level as **echoes** of the Lower East Side New York populated by Berrigan’s friends, lovers, artists, musicians and American celebrities. A supreme example of a sonic collage, rather than a visual one is to be found in an otherwise quite cryptic “Sonnet XXVI”:

This excitement to be all of night, Henry!
 Elvis Peering-Eye danced with Carol Clifford, high,
 Contrived whose leaping herb edifies Kant! I’ll burst!
 Smile! “Got rye in this’n?”
 Widow Dan sold an eye t’meander an X. Whee! Yum!
 Pedant tore her bed! Tune, hot! Full cat saith why foo?
 “Tune hot full cat?” “No! nexus neck ink!”
 All moron (on) while “weighed in fur” pal! “Ah’m Sun!”
 Dayday came to get her daddy. “Daddy,”
 Saith I to Dick in the verge, `(In the Verge!)
 And “gee” say I, “Easter” “fur” “few tears” “Dick!”
 My `Carol now a Museum! “O, Ma done fart!” “Less full”
 Cat, “she said, “One’s there!” “now cheese, ey?”
 “Full cat wilted, bought ya a pup!” “So, nose excitement?”

(Berrigan Sonnet XXVI, ll. 1–14)

This sonnet is exceptional in the way it uses its language substance. Not typically however, most of the words and textual references have not been previously used in other sonnets. However, as Berrigan stated in his comments to the typescript of *The Sonnets* it was “[m]ade up by me—a poem written in phonetics, tho wanting to convey not an inside message, but via surface-i.e.-women will betray you, why-etc. no conclusion” (Berrigan 83–4). What is characteristic here is that Berrigan makes the sonnet precisely **by ear**, by means of phonetic rather than factual logic of composition. The words which have been used in this sonnet are cut-ups of conversations in which fragmented sounds seek to override traditional semantic fields of meaning and syntactic rules of arrangement. Moreover, the sonic effect of pitch and tone is intensified by means of exclamation marks and question marks used in the function of emphasis, like for example in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. As it is the case in other sonnets of the cycle, names and places are not so much referential designates but rather proxies or eclectic emblems of a new American reality. Its grotesque collision of high and low registers where Elvis Presley meets Emanuel Kant, and “[fu]ll cat saith why foo?” and “o Ma done fart!” is evidently a brave poetic rendering of what Berrigan himself is actually doing with the sonnet: he re-enlivens the stale and closed poetic form with the sounds and sights of modern America; he brings the **logos** back to where it should be, to the petrified and bookish form which used to be a **sonetto**, a little song.

Interestingly enough, in an interview which Ted Berrigan had with Ann Waldman, the poet openly stated that his understanding of the sonnet’s structure is in many respects painterly or sculptural in nature:

My technical achievement in *The Sonnets* was to conceive the sonnet as fourteen units of one line each. I don’t think it had been done that way much before. I don’t think that it had been broken down much more than into couplets, so I had a lot more variables to work with and a lot more possibilities of structures. It was just like cubism. (Waldman 113)

In his essay on “The Strategy of Simultaneity in Ted Berrigan’s *The Sonnets*” Timothy Henry explains these words of the poet in the following way: “By breaking down the form into fourteen lines of equal importance and weight, Berrigan stresses the role of each individual piece of the poem. By avoiding the arrangement of lines into sub-structures like quatrains, octaves, or couplets, he creates a form which is divisible into fourteen “equal” parts,

similar to how an hour is divisible into sixty minutes, allowing for the sonnet to become a consistent and reliable structure capable of measuring the passing of time (Henry 13). Timothy Henry further explains that “Berrigan’s use of the lines as ‘moveable parts’ or ‘blocks’ supports another one of Berrigan’s views on his book, that the poems were not so much ‘written’ as they were ‘built’ (Henry 17).

On the other hand, in his talk given at the Poetry Project on February 27, 1979 Berrigan commented on several aspects of his technique of poetic composition of *The Sonnets* which he had completed in 1964. As a point of reference to his own texts he chose the poems written by Edwin Denby and William Shakespeare. The main goal of this comparison was, it seems, to justify his apparently “Romantic” method of composition as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions” as “[he] wanted to get material up from inside [him] that [he] would be loath to admit otherwise, things about [himself] and about others that [he] would not normally say.” (Berrigan 4). It is noteworthy that Berrigan is attracted to Shakespeare’s sonnet cycle in the way it was organized, especially its apparently loose thematic pattern of order which resembled his own dynamic structure of the sequence. Moreover, it was Shakespeare who served as a literary inspiration in the early stages of Berrigan’s practice. Berrigan would obsessively read Shakespeare’s sonnets daily and he would write some very specific imitations of favourite sonnets of the bard “until that **music** was in [his] head. (Berrigan 6, my stress). Admittedly, Berrigan makes numerous references to aural/oral dimension of Shakespeare’s influence on his writing. For example, he states that when he:

... started writing sonnets, the first thing that I noticed was that the diction in Shakespeare’s sonnets which **I heard with my American ears**—heard from my voice saying those words—was very different than any Shakespearian play I had ever seen [...]. (Berrigan 7, my stress)

These words emphasize the importance of sound effect rather than visual layout of the sonnet in the creative process of Berrigan’s first sonnets. The following fragment of Berrigan’s recollection of his enchantment with the sonnet as a poetic form makes this point even more evident:

I decided to accept the assumption that the sonnet would be 14 lines long and not to worry about where the rhymes fell, nor would I worry about what measure the line had, that I would write them **by ear**, I would measure them **by**

ear, I would have the lines end by what I then knew about line endings . . . If I wanted a line to be this long, I would have it be that long, as long as the poem retained its shapeliness. Not visual shapeliness, but shapeliness as being **said out loud**. (Berrigan 7, my stress)

In order to understand Berrigan's poetics of composition it is absolutely fundamental to remember about the centrality of the sonic dimension of his texts, the aural/oral core of his sonnets. In contrast to the majority of poets he does not count syllables organized into more or less regular metrical patterns, but utters them "out loud". Notice, for instance, the opening six lines of Sonnet XXXII where every line has a different number of syllables (8, 16, 7, 9, 11 and 10) and no dominant rhythmical meter:

The blue day! In the air winds dance
 Now our own children are strangled down in the bubbling
 quadrangle.
 To thicken! He left his head
 Returning past the houses he passed
 "Goodbye, Bernie!" "Goodbye, Carol!" "Goodbye,
 Marge!"

(Berrigan, Sonnet XXXII, ll. 1–5)

Semantically, these lines do not make much immediate sense. The thread which connects these lines is an unspecified elegiac/nostalgic mood of resignation and sadness highlighted by evocations of windy air, drowning, stifling and suffocating dense atmosphere, wandering astray and farewells. More importantly, however, and in keeping with Berrigan's own method of composition in which "the sonnet—the Shakespearian sonnet and later on [his] own—seems to [him] to be made up of units, and those units were lines", those separate lines cohere, as it were, sonically (Berrigan 7). The vocalic spine of line 1 is a triple alliterative repetition of the voiced plosive consonant [d]; line 2 exploits triple vowel assonance of semi-vowel [au] and one [ou]; in line 3 we have again a triple alliteration of the voiceless glottal fricative [h]; in line 4 we find a middle rhyme of homonymic "passed" and "past", and finally in line 5 we have a triple repetition of the same word (or a triple middle rhyme). Likewise, it is not unimportant that the quoted fragment is larded with five exclamation marks to intensify its sonorous quality.

Explaining the peculiar structuring of Berrigan's *The Sonnets* and its bizarre rhetoric, Alice Notley, who in her private life was the poet's second wife, stated that "[t]he book certainly has the feel of a long single work, but

the individual poems do also feel like sonnets . . . partly because they are so slab like and each word so owns its own space; but it's also because the traditional sonnet structure tends to be underneath" (Notley xii). Further on, in the same "Introduction" to this fine collection she draws the reader's attention to several characteristics of Berrigan's poetic technique of composition. Among them she notes how Berrigan became familiar with the poems of the New York poets like Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, the theorists and practitioners of aleatorism like Alfred North Whitehead and John Cage, the experimental works of the visual artists like, for example, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol or Robert Rauschenberg as well as the works of Marcel Duchamp, the Dadaists, the Cubists and the Surrealists which he examined in the MOMA or art museums of Philadelphia (Notley viii).

How important the experiments of visual artists and theoreticians of music of the past and present moment was for his own "method"—as he called it—can be seen in the private notes which Berrigan dated to late November of 1962:

Wrote (?) (Made) five sonnets tonight, by taking one line from each of a group of poems, at random, going from first to last poem then back again until 12 lines, then making the final couplet from any 2 poems, in the group, one line at random from each. Wrote by ear, and automatically. Very interesting results...

All this was partly inspired by reading about DADA but mostly inspired by my activities along the same lines for the past 10 months (or since reading LOCUS SOLUS TWO & seeing the assemblage Show @ Working on Collages with Joe (see Self-Portrait)

Now back to more DADA. (In Lopez 292).

This entry from Berrigan's journal points to the painterly inspirations in the composition of the sonnets, but it also discloses Berrigan's technique of designing them by cutting up and rearranging individual lines of previous texts which in turn serve as "found" building blocks of his new compositions. In this process of creative formation of text, Berrigan seems to be "recycling" his own words and longer phrases with an intention of investing them with new connotative possibilities. Instead of using readymade objects as the substance of his collage-poems he uses "readyheard" words as verbal utterances.

We may notice this kaleidoscopic process of verbal rearrangement in "Sonnet XXI" and "Penn Station". Both poems contain, as it were, the same "language substance", i.e. individual lines in both poems are identical, how-

ever, they have been arranged in different order. In a typescript to *The Sonnets* from 1963, Berrigan comments on “Sonnet XXI” calling it “method rearrangement of ‘Penn Station’” by means of which “[t]he first five lines are of an ordering similar to that used to make XV, that is proceeding from first line to last line, second line, second to last line and on inward, but after the fifth line that order stops. The poem ends, though, with what had been line 8 in ‘Penn Station’: it has still managed to turn that poem inside out” (Berrigan 83).

Berrigan’s method of textual recycling of his own poems is the foundation of his poetic technique and is used throughout the cycle with larger units (such as entire lines) and smaller ones (individual words). Such repetitions and echoes of “used” language have traditionally been viewed by critics as techniques which Berrigan “had learnt and had validated by ‘Assemblage’ artists such as Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, whose techniques had been taken up by New York artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns and Berrigan’s friend Joe Brainard...” (Lopez 292). But as noticed before, and Berrigan’s own words appear to prove it, there is another important factor which, although overlooked by most critical studies, appears to have shaped his strategies of poetic composition – its sonic, auditory dimension. In the entry from Berrigan’s journal for 5:15 am, 20 November 1962, the poet stated that he “[w]rote **by ear**, and automatically” (Fagin 1999, my stress). During his *Sonnet Workshop* Berrigan explained the musicality of his technique stating that he:

... placed the earlier poem one on top of the other and made a mental rule that I would take one line from each one. There were six of them. I simply looked and found a line, but I didn’t always just grab the first one I looked at. If I looked and it didn’t **resonate**, I didn’t take it; ... So for me the unit of the sonnet is the line. It is interesting to know what your own basic unit of writing is ... I like that to be **the constant musical element** in my poems ... (Berrigan 1989:9, my stress).

With so much authorial emphasis on the importance of sound substance in the structure of the poems expressed personally on numerous occasions, together with specific examples of the use of language predominantly in the function of sound effects rather than visual images, allows us to state that Berrigan’s poetics of composition is primarily aural/oral. The visual component of his poems, so characteristic for closed forms like the sonnet, enhances the dominant technique of registering the flow of “ready-heard” words of Berrigan himself, the streets of New York, or the fragments of poems he read some time ago. The grouping of such language into one line

units, which undergo in turn various, sometimes bizarre transformations, is again both musical and visual in its origin; it is keeping with aleatory method of composition in music (John Cage) as well as chance methods of creating collages (Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp).

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DŹWIĘKOWE SONETY TEDA BERRIGANA

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest problematyce interakcji między wizualnymi i dźwiękowymi dominantami kompozycyjnymi w kanonicznym cyklu sonetów napisanych przez Teda Berrigana, amerykańskiego poetę drugiej generacji tzw. poetów nowojorskich. Studium to dotyczy sonetu, a więc formy poetyckiej, która z natury jest „formą zamkniętą”, tzn. taką, w której kształt i budowa utworu dominuje nad elementami dźwiękowej aranżacji językowej. Wkład Berrigana w gatunkowy rozwój sonetu polega na twórczym połączeniu obu tych dominant poprzez swoiste rozbitcie blokowej budowy sonetu z układu składającego się z 3/4/6/8 wersowych zwrotek na pojedyncze jednolinijkowe „zwrotki”. W procesie dalszej obróbki kompozycyjnej te krótkie wersy podlegają dynamicznemu procesowi dowolnych permutacji na wzór współczesnych poecie teorii muzycznych (aleatoryzm) czy plastycznych (kolaż). Ponadto Berrigan uzupełnia ten dynamiczny układ wizualnej organizacji tekstu o elementy dźwiękowe zaczerpnięte z potocznego języka amerykańskiej ulicy czy prywatnej konwersacji zasłyszanych w ciągu dnia. Zarówno wypowiedzi teoretyczne Berrigana na temat budowy jego sonetów, jak i same wiersze w cyklu *The Sonnets* potwierdzają fundamentalne znaczenie dominanty dźwiękowej w strukturze kompozycyjnej jego wierszy.

Słowa kluczowe: Ted Berrigan; sonet; poetyka; dźwięk w poezji; obraz w poezji; literatura amerykańska; język w literaturze.