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[essay as liner notes for J.F.]

HEARING ENDS IN DARKNESS

For Jarrod Fowler & for John Mowitt; let me spin out some categories from thinking about experimental literature—to see how they sound when rubbed up against radical ‘percussion as percussion.’

What would a language writing as radical percussion *sound* like? What kind of *space* does it occupy—or call out for?

The issues involved might hug some trajectories both of contemporary theory *and* of contemporary experimental writing.

First, we dethrone the originating ‘subject’—leaving the author/performer unseated. No longer ‘sovereign.’ The (sound) text no longer ‘autonomous.’ No longer an ‘inner’ authority worth reproducing in our reception.

Once we dethrone the performer/author, they can no longer translate or ‘explain’ the making of sense & meaning & value—or at least not all by themselves. We listen for a shift from inner to outer: toward an emphasis on a *pragmatic* dimension—toward the listener, the beholder, the reader. [Here I’ll conflate all these into what I’ll call the Reader.]

[In the political economy, this parallels an awareness of a shift in emphasis from Production to Consumption. (Or an understanding of how crucial the social relations of consumption must be to the shape or interpretation of production & to its success or fragility in the ‘moshpit’ of meaning.) As these shifts get articulated after the 1960s, they resonate with a change in the political climate & in the political hopes which are more & more invested in the ‘affected’ community, rather than in ‘heroic’ leaders or in prefixed institutional ‘structures’ or ‘forms’ ‘up on stage.’]

The key, for writing & for percussion: to see how best to involve or implicate the Reader—(& to sound out this *contingent* role, rather than taking it for granted or treating it like a deductive reflex of preexisting form & structure). ‘Heroism’ devolves to the listener/reader. And the overall shift rhymes with a culture of copies, of unoriginality, of sampling/appropriation, of ‘making do,’ of ‘othering.’

This might also remind us of a move toward participatory ‘democracy’—away from the Author’s central (sovereign) authority. And yet, instead of leaving a vacuum to be filled by some celebration of posthumanist machinic automatism, it takes this ‘de-authorizing’ of writing—not as an end in itself—but as an occasion to empower the Reader.

But: what *kind* of Reader could be empowered? And what kind of textual experience is best equipped to deliver or make possible this Reader? And what kind of text or writing is best equipped to make possible a pleasurable resistant or transformative experience?

We could chart the method of writing (& of the ways in which it gets experienced) across two distinct but intersecting planes:

1. Vertically, a plane of depth details the '*what*': of levels of *abstraction* or types & degrees of *reference*—making a semantic spectrum that extends, on one end, from the offering up of purely non-referential or literal matter through a middle zone in which there is an engagement with (generically) referential materials & then proceeds all the way, at the other end, to a variety of (expressive or depictive) representational practices.

And then, intersecting this:

2. We can chart out a plane of concentric circles, configuring the pragmatic '*how*' of operating contextually, toward the 'outside': of soliciting a Reader in a variety of contextual ways. This extends outward from a bounded & centripetal 'center' of Formalizing Autonomy, to an outer 'layer' where the space of a basic (or generic) Reader does get engaged, and then extending further out into the 'play' made possible in an even more discursive & more broadly social arena.

It's this second plane, or series of concentric spaces, that I want to elaborate on a little bit here. What is a work 'subject to'? The key question would be how a work *alters* the contextual space outside—& how the contextual space allows for an *expansive* Reader. Openness—the press on the *how*. If there is an *act*, let's imagine it as the Reader's, not something accomplished on the part of the writing 'all by itself'; with the Reader as 'functional' (& possibly collective), with contextual 'translation' (or totalizing) taking place on the side of—& not 'on behalf of'—the Reader.

[This outer social layer or circle is occupiable by a particularized (or 'surplus') Reader. And that more socially engaged Readership itself makes up a spectrum between a fixed or static identity (or agency), at one end, to another identity which is 'on the move,' tilted toward (& open to) development & fluidity & transformation & change.]

This would be a plane of *Context* or Mediation—extending from an [auratic or formal] 'immediacy'—& then outward toward an acknowledgement of the Reader's active mediation, & then still further toward an even more outlying discursive or social network. Where the authored act becomes progressively *less definitive*—& encourages more & more *sharing* of power (or empowerment).

We could configure this plane of Context in three concentric circles:

A), A centripetal (inward-sucking) point (or 'inner circle') of formalistic closure & autonomy at the center. And around that, extending the text outward, would be B), mechanisms by which a generic (any kind of—or basic kind of) Reader would be engaged by a certain kind of text noticeably venturing out into that Reader's actual physical (or 'real') space. *Gaps* solicit a contextual space by *allowing* or *requiring* a Reader response. So, for instance, if the material/materiality is shredded, torn up, 'volatilized,' it moves it further away from formalizable autonomy on this plane. And, even more extendedly, (C), we find the text engaging (often by transformationally working on) a set of discursive or social meanings (or elements of sense-making) so that we find an even more outreaching layer or concentric circle where 'participants'

of a less generic & more particularized sort are capable of being engaged—with the very sorts of discursive meaning that distinguish them, that particularize them.

All this makes up a *contextual plane*.

This suggests a charting of the uncloseable, the unformable 'in itself,' the move towards an "informalism" where the Reader is doing the work & is given responsibility for the 'forming.' This plane amounts to an exchange, a map of transactions between inner & outer. Context involves the types of space created for the Reader, the degree & type of 'Intrusion' involved in Reception—the types of *Interpellation* & the type of *Resistance* made available (or at least the ways of foiling or skirting or distorting that Interpellation).

Interpellation, famous from Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" & from its wielding by cultural theorists, points to a mode of *address* or *hailing* that effectively *positions* the listener—or at least reinforces & stabilizes their positioning. You are out walking in the street. Someone calls out behind you, "Yo!, Shithead!" By swivelling around, you acknowledge that you are (or certainly at least might be) the appropriate, fitting 'subject' of that address. And the acknowledgement—as a *recognition*—helps to create or upholster a space for you to occupy, a position to identify with, to take up 'subjective residence'—transforming the listener *into* a subject, with a *merely* or basically physical 180 degree conversion. *Closure*—the predetermining of the *what*, linked with *recognition*. *Recruitment*—the hegemony of the *what* over the *how*. When is it more than mythification?

For each of these three concentric circles or arenas:

First, we can ask how each articulates a different mode by which the interpellation of the Reader (or listener) would be affirmed / confirmed / reassured / guaranteed. And, second, we can ask how experimental writing (or sound) could help resist / transgress / unsettle / distantiate / undercut such a mode of Interpellation.

And each of these three arenas of contextualization could be elaborated a little further, by assigning to each a type of sign, an element of textuality, & a characteristic type of Reader.

A.

First, the 'inward pull' or internal logic of Form—as *Closure*, as *Autonomy*, as if unmediated. The 'for itself' & the 'in itself,' that which doesn't need to be 'actualized'—form, the formable, as the directive, as the closure-able.

Creating a unifiable *gestalt*—as the 'already.' To pull the Reader in, & *by doing so*, to function as if the *contagions* of everyday reality [context] can be held at arm's length—with the art's formal properties working as anaesthesia or bandage [but also as *lure*].

The equivalent of a sign of the *icon* type (where the sign physically resembles either the referent or object's properties or else is an analog of its organizing principles).

[And possibly comes to physically 'resemble' the Reader, through its characteristic style of Interpellation. The iconized reader. We would resemble *pictures* or *maps*—images or diagrams—*modelled on* the text. A work's 'authority' becomes *our* mimesis.]

The Reader choreographed here is a kind of pre-reader, or pre-subject (a self or individual not yet equipped with full, discriminating *agency* & choice-making; an imprint, often where

potential agency is getting overwhelmed). As if 'the Possible' were anonymous—or virtual—as if unperceived or at least not constituted by perception—unmediated, uncoded, as if without much need at all for any intervening receiver.

[Some parallel here to the Lacanian realm of the Imaginary. And to Charles Peirce's 'Firstness,' where the "mere may-be" functions as an array of possibilities in all its 'freshness,' unselected/unmotivated by any pragmatic interest.]

Element of language involved = the 'already read,' the 'not-to-be-read,' or the 'doesn't need to be read.'

The characteristic mode of Interpellation here suggests a soothing or deadening or hypnotic positioning. The fix is in.

[Paralleling *either* the dreaded regressive 'unit of the mass' (like the victim of spectacle), or perhaps the swooning absorbed-into-presence of the contemplative subject. As *unchoice*, or mimesis of the listener—modelled on 'Authority'.]

In whatever version, fittingly, we expect to find a non-Reader—captivated by a closed, formally complete product of art-making.

And if we want to counter (or counteract) this Interpellation, a progressive project would very likely involve a *de-forming*, a move toward (or a stress on) incompleteness, a rejection of closure, an acknowledgement of the contextual elements calling out for active engagement (yet adverse to hypnosis).

[This de-forming could open up opportunities for *either* a fixed/static Reader, or a moving Reader (the dancing Reader, the Reader 'on the move') to emerge, minimally individuated, differentiated out from the mass, pulled into focus as if by centrifuge.] With that challenge to Interpellation, we approximate what happens in a second, more extended layer:

B.

One concentric zone outward on this plane:

The text, or the sound, more pointedly involved in address, extends itself into the existing territory of a generic Reader, fashioning a determinate (durational) space. Here we get beyond the detemporalizing 'all at once' of iconic (autonomizing) reception.

Readership gets engaged by a more physicalized interaction—the offering up of materials that can be read or interpreted [& thus re-read]: ones that *depend upon* the playing or engagement of the Reader for their full[er] significance to register (or be experienced).

An art less *already unified* into a finished form or gestalt that preexists (& seems not to depend upon) the Reader.

Something which suggests a *causal* relationship between sign & referent (or object): the equivalent of a sign of the *index* kind—where the sign could register a physical trace of the referent, like a clue or symptom—with some coercive control over the Reader. Here we find the press of documentary *evidence*, rather than the distancing aura of 'logic': with the index—either connected to an object by some factual relation or by 'forcibly intruding,' whether it gets interpreted or not.

[And where the Reader might suggest a physical trace of the sign—where the recruited are ‘called out’ & ‘forced to correspond.’ The indexicalized reader: index as Reader; Reader as a *predicate*. Impact = to be ‘moved.’ Readers as clues or symptoms partially *caused by* the work. Text’s ‘power’ as measured by its (mediated) *impact* on the Reader.]

The Reader being engaged or reinforced here seems like a more abstract (phenomenological) sort—equipped with a certain agency & capacity for choice & identification, but where this still remains at a basic, generic (or unparticularized) level.

[Some parallel here to the Lacanian realm of the Real. And to the *documentary*; to Peirce’s reactive, perceptual ‘Secondness’: inducements of movement, the realm of ‘brute facts.’]

Element of language involved = Syntax. Mostly. A syntax of generic individuals gets called for (or hailed)—to mark out the abstract functioning of a language: as minimally readable or decipherable, but without much in the way of non-abstract or particularized meaning (or ‘use’). [Almost as if we’re back to Marx’s *Theses on Feurbach* & the notion of an “abstract—isolated—human individual” (as distinct from the socialized, unisolated, ‘real’ individual).] A parsing: a marking out of slots & functions, capable of being occupied by ‘any’ subject. [And percussion often fits here. It tends to register too intrusively to be tameable by any formalizing autonomy. It tends at least to carry an indexical punch.]

Here, the mode of Interpellation suggests a physical harnessing of the permitted Reader: the soliciting of *some* expansive movement, the creating of *some* space for movement, but without undercutting the ‘security’ of a generic position. The interpellated *subject*—as generic Reader—precedes any *particularized* prompting, any specific identity. The index makes the specific—to fine-tune into specificity; the generic position capable of making specific assertions or ‘reading’ “specific objects.” And the Reader is prompted to link up resonances much like a detective’s discovery of clues or the doctor’s ‘reading’ of symptoms to work up a diagnosis.

The text offers a ‘beating.’ It hammers the Reader into a trajectory (much like the premodern space of fear & punishment)—[as in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*]—but at least the distances are not insurmountable: there’s some space to be *affected*, to be opened up.

What could enable the ‘fencing moves’ of a Reader, on the borderline between inner & outer? How could it ward off excess stimuli & carve out some space? To counteract this Interpellation, the generic Reader would need to be offered a filter, a protective shielding—by some way in which the work could be felt to *undercut itself*. To solicit the Reader’s ‘cutting.’ The ‘heroic’ Reader or reading listener would be osmotic: not ‘swept away’ by the text, yet also not impermeable—more like an ‘organ’ of the threshold *regulating* the intake, as if a controlled leakage or exchange (rather than ‘free trade’).

The clues need to be ‘read’ backwards; they need to be *explained*—reading as translation, requiring some inference or interpretation of what’s missing or equivocal: as a way to limit any imposition of a fixed, unambiguous syntax; some shift toward the use of materials which have the kind of ambiguity or openness (even if only openness to prior prejudice!) that we find approximated in the third, more extended concentric band or layer:

C.

A discursive or social 'outer' layer—where the work (the text) engages a less generic Reader (extending itself into the particularized territory of meaning or sense that we associate with the discursive elements of a text rhythmically activated with socially loaded materials).

Right away, the autonomy & closure of the distanced aesthetic object or icon gets sharply undermined. And so does the 'merely' physical (if more open) operation of a generic sign or index, in its status as a 'pre-cultural' event.

Here we're engaging a particularized Reader *with* a set of cultural materials (of varying degrees of recognizability or familiarity). We move outward from the generic *subject* to a particular *identity*, a particularized Reader capable of making general assertions. The Reader is no longer *merely* 'a' subject, but becomes "tendentious," the resposdee with a particular agenda. So that the work's meaning operates on the same plane or in the same arena as the socialized subject who is capable of cultural engagement: to produce a work that *depends* upon that actual (non-generic) Reader for its significance to get experienced. The aesthetic transaction takes on a more audibly cultural tone.

A Reader discursively engaged—& that also implies that the social materials will depend upon the Reader's involvement: for them to be validated, reinforced, or contested. There is no 'finished' discourse; no 'complete' rendition of a social body.

With this, the sign relates to its referent (or object) in an arbitrary, conventional manner—as with the *symbol*. We operate within a conventional [rule-following] relation to the text. Norms [or "laws"] provide the *motivation*.

[And where the sign 'array' is situated in an arbitrary, conventional relationship to the Reader: plunged into a discursive pattern of resonances and overtones, it promotes additional or 'surplus' meaning on the way to being conventionalized or arbitrated. As if an argument is getting made.]

Here, the Reader who is (partially, repetitively) solicited or positioned is no longer 'bare' or 'basic' or generic. Now it's *particularized*, expected to have distinguishing features, adjectival modifiers—& to be engaged in cultural choices *on the basis of* those distinguishing aspects. The experience is interpretive & not merely literal or perceptual.

(Meanwhile, the more particularized the identity, the more that can threaten the reproduction of those particularized non-generic features—& the more that has to get arranged to secure or guarantee them: hence, we are likely to find an even more expansive motivation or 'security regime' on the part of the Reader.)

[Some parallel here to the Lacanian realm of the Symbolic. And to Peirce's relation or lawful or action-oriented 'Thirdness']

Element of language involved = Content. (Semantic sense, social sense.)

The slots & functions are now fine-tuned socially or culturally—are *layered* choices, no longer 'one size fits all' (even for a seemingly 'radical' project).

[The matrix of associations is loaded. The Reader is the content.]

The mode of Interpellation—as a fixing theorem: not to reveal the unfinished, the problematic—suggests a pointedly social recruitment, where the space for the Reader to be affected, to be ‘open,’ is being shaped into a directionally disciplinary space—as *Influence* on our choices, our sovereignty. Discourse as contractual; discursive ‘recruitment’ as differential or relational; discourse as a sign system tapped into.

A space of self-discipline, a summons to normalized or domesticated choices, to social identifications (& often ‘pride,’ with appropriate gang tags or colors or puffed-up claims of ‘I did it my way’).

Not a ‘beating’ ‘from the outside,’ but often a self-coordinated & well-practiced dancing routine: or reading as synchronized accompaniment.

To counteract *this* kind of Interpellation, to create a space for *resistance*, we would shape the work to take advantage of the fact that cultural recruitment isn’t typically unified. The accompaniment is wayward, unpredictable, or re-chartable with a different ‘fake book.’

That any fixed Reader identity (or agency) can be unsettled, discombobulated—not ‘all at once’ in some traumatic wounding or redemption, but as an accompaniment, or backbeat, or background noise, to a commitment to change. The move is away from the (even grammatically marked out) isolation & relative autonomy of individuals—to a possible collective future via [informalist] *connections*. A receptive subject which can be *connectable*, ‘politicizable,’ open to any number of collective *projects*—not just the ‘mass’ demonized by genteel opinion.

What’s worth resisting—figuring out a strategy for resisting—re: *either* a recruitment into preset identity *or* regression into a collective mass-like object. Collective listenership: the *connections* are forged in just the same way as they are between the cultural inflections of sounds & sound mixes. They are not imposed ahead of time—[“ahead of time”: a *telling* phrase].

The process could play out in two stages: first, a heightened awareness of distinguishing *cuts* (instead of any suturing or confirmation of predetermined, precomposed identity); & second, a revved-up move toward *connections*. First, a mixdown into a complexly layered set of [motivic] raw materials; second, the highlighting of links & hybridities & interdependencies *between* these subject positions or motivations, pointing toward possible collective *identities*. To ‘cohere’ the particularized Readers into an active *chorus*, responding, filling in gaps, leaping the intervals/ layers.

In the field of Interpellation, there are gaps; there are contradictions which a text can take advantage of. Sounds are unsound. The individual isn’t unified. Interpellative effects are not unified. There is rarely if ever an umbrella of a unified ideology. Agency as *social resistance* would be made possible in part by the dissonance in & among the various subject positions made more available (& by which a Reader could be ‘called by’).

There is a social/cultural ‘collage’ quality to the ‘content,’ to the address activated by a discursively-saturated work like this. Not the individual as a presumed plenitude, complete & singular & coherent in itself, but as a *lamination*, a less predictable collage. (And relevant to so much radical art & music & writing: the layered & multiple resonance summons up a characteristically *urban* space. Urban multiplex circumstances project some of their own energy & structure back into the writing/reading.)

This is one thing that makes possible a Reader 'on the move'—'in process' socially (& not just according to some abstract generic schema). The 'backbeat' as the Reader *retranslating*, as a socially contestable resounding or reflection upon itself.

A Reader encouraged to beat back, to reject or reconsider or reinterpret; to *reassemble* a life of choices—including the choice of willful distortion, of 'creative falsification,' of overlaying, of dissonance, of noise. Of conceptual percussion as social repercussion.