

## English Studies in Canada



# Toward a History of Literary Listening

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Volume 46, Number 2-3-4, June–September–December 2020

New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111327ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903547>

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### Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

### ISSN

0317-0802 (print)

1913-4835 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this document

Camlot, J. (2020). Toward a History of Literary Listening. *English Studies in Canada*, 46(2-3-4), 263–271. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2020.a903547>

# Toward a History of Literary Listening

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I AM OUTLINING A NEW PROJECT, a history of literary listening. It will be a different kind of disciplinary history of literary studies than others I have read and enjoyed, like Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* (1987/2007), John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* (1993) and *Professing Criticism* (2022), Paul Eggert's *The Work and the Reader in Literary Studies* (2021), for example. One of my opening questions is: Does literary studies as a discipline have discernible audile techniques? The answer is a resounding yes. It must be, right? And then, on second thought, we are inclined to ask, What do you mean by literary studies "as a discipline"? Because, if we are to consider the application of audile techniques within a discipline, we must first understand the defining qualities of the discipline itself, even if there are, as in the case of literary studies, various sub-fields, many of them explicitly interdisciplinary in their orientations, within it. What qualifies an audile technique, a method of listening, as constitutive of a *literary* method of analysis or interpretation? Insofar as such methods of listening "work to operationalize distinctions" (Siegert 14)<sup>1</sup> and function as "concrete set[s] of

<sup>1</sup> As Bernhard Siegert writes: "Every culture begins with the introduction of distinctions: inside/outside, pure/impure, sacred/profane, male/female, human/animal, speech/absence of speech, signal/noise, and so on. The chains that make up these distinctions are recursive; that is, any given distinction may be

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limited and related practices of listening and practical orientations towards listening” (Sterne 90), surely we can identify some distinctively literary critical concepts that point to significant practices and orientations toward listening that help literary critics make distinctions and claims about their objects of study. These would, ideally, be concepts and approaches that have wide implications for the practice of literary study, even if these concepts come from outside the discipline of literary studies itself. They would be substantial, like those introduced by R. Murray Schafer in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and Tuning of the World* (1977, 1994) as the foundational techniques of acoustic ecology and design, or like the overarching *modes* of critical listening Michel Chion introduced for film studies in works such as *The Voice in Cinema* (1999)/*La voix au cinéma* (1982) and *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1994)/*L’audio-vision: Son et image au cinéma* (1990).

Are there audile techniques for literary listening akin to Schafer’s range of practical methods of preparation for listening, including what he called “Ear Cleaning” (208, 272), through the structured pursuit of listening walks and sound walks, through methods for using recording media, and through techniques for classifying and scoring heard sounds and producing other written documentation as part of the kind of audile practice that contributes to eco-acoustical listening (123–50)? Are there well-articulated *modes* of listening to literary works, along the lines of Chion’s defined modes of listening to sound in cinema, namely: causal listening, semantic listening, and reduced listening (25–34)? A literature scholar (perhaps one of a certain era) might think, first, of something like Alexander Pope’s poetic axiom that, in artful literature, “[t]he *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Senfe*” (22). They might then consider all terms, tools, and methods that exist in the field that are used to generate observations about sound patterns in poetry, and about the significance of such patterns for literary expression. So, literary metrics and prosody, including methods and techniques of scansion (identifying patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in lines of verse), the analysis of rhyme (ABAB, etc.), and other sonic elements or patterns found in a written text are all signs that literary critics have developed audile techniques for their critical methodology. Certainly, categories like iambic trimeter versus iambic

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re-entered on either side of another distinction ... The constitutive force of these distinctions and recursions is the reason why the contingent culture in which we live is frequently taken to be the real, “natural” order of things. Researching cultural techniques therefore also amounts to an epistemological engagement with the medial conditions of whatever lays claim to reality” (14).

tetrameter, assonance versus consonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and others, are examples of concepts designed to help critics make distinctions based on sonic qualities in the analysis of literary works. So, the history of literary prosody and metrics, as pursued by scholars Meredith Martin (*The Rise and Fall of Meter*) and Ben Glaser (*Modernism's Metronome*), is most certainly one important (and extensive) area to consider in an account of the history of literary listening. But there are many other episodes in this category of literary history to consider, beyond that of the long-developed toolbox of literary metrical and prosodic methods critics use in the analysis of literary works.

Some possible areas, avenues, and cases of focus for pursuing such a question: we could (we should) go back to prescriptive elocution from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for a wide range of schools and practices that outlined methods for performing literary works and, consequently, assumed methods for receiving and appreciating (listening to) such oral interpretations.<sup>2</sup> And acts of literary criticism have long entailed (and still do entail) the oral delivery of critical interpretations and acts of listening and response to those critical articulations. Sarah Zimmerman's recent study, *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* represents a contribution to the history of the critical side of literary listening by offering auditors' accounts of literary lectures from the early decades of the nineteenth century and for the way it describes the fluid movement between literary oral performance in the form of lecture and recitation (as part of lecturing) and printed literary works, in the form of lecture scripts, annotations on books used by lecturers, written accounts of the lectures heard by auditors after the fact, and published versions of lectures originally delivered before an audience in public. The romantic literary lecture as a structured event within a wider context of live audition and mediated (print) circulation qualifies as a telling episode in the history of literary listening.

By "episode in the history of literary listening" I mean a discernible set of ideas and theories, actions and activities, institutions, technologies, or infrastructures, and usually some combination of these, that, through research, analysis, and critical storytelling, will reveal a distinctive manifestation of the necessity for either implicitly or explicitly articulated dispositions and techniques of listening that work to define and instantiate literature as an entity with cultural and social meaning. There are many

2 Works like Marian Wilson Kimber's *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* are a help.

other event-based situations that we might identify as equally important and useful to analyze from the perspective of listening, from late nineteenth-century oral examinations, or recitations as they were called (see Catherine Robson), to poetry readings in different styles and formats, of different periods, to other forms of literary dissemination as they have developed with and through the discipline. The study of particular kinds of mediated events for the models of performance and reception they reveal, and the literary audile techniques they imply, will be an interesting and fruitful part of this episodic history. But beyond such eventful situations of literary audition as they were designed to occur, say, within the 1930s literary listening architectonics of Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room, I think a significant way to explore this question will entail thinking through the history of literary criticism and the institutionalization of literature as a discipline of study in relation to models, metaphors, and methods, both implicit and explicit, of listening.

In *Close Listening*, Charles Bernstein provides a wish list of the possible effects of literary audile techniques, without really outlining how to enact them, practically, as techniques. It is part of the recent interest in how to integrate listening into critical practice, but it is also, I think, a late stage in a long historical episode of literary listening that began with the consolidation of "close reading" as a method of literary analysis associated with the New Criticism; a method so well known to literature professors that it can function as an obvious point of reference and turn of phrase for the title of Bernstein's book. One of my arguments in *Phonopoetics*, following the insights of Andrew Elfenbein, was that literary interpretation understood as a mode of oral performance was silenced by the New Criticism which reconceived "voice" and "sound" as structural elements of the literary work that function to give it aesthetic coherency to be unpacked through silent reading and formal analysis (Elfenbein 202; Camlot 116–17). This is true in a broad sense. But as I began to show in *Phonopoetics*, there continued to be many oral techniques of interpretation, literary dissemination, pedagogical uses of literary performance and listening, not to mention poetry and other literary readings, throughout the twentieth century. So, there is a counter history to the argument that the New Criticism silenced critical interpretation, and the analysis of poetry, for multiple decades. It is an argument that needs to be written more fully, and this argument represents an interesting critical episode in the history of literary listening. I will not tell that big story here but, rather, will present an important moment of critical ambivalence about listening from this longer story by pursuing a close reading of one short chapter from a "New Critical" work

that had a big influence on the study of literature. My reading of this work will show just how deeply what we retrospectively think of as New Critical methods were immersed in imagining literary interpretation as a method of listening, as an audible technique for the understanding of literature. And it will show, also, how dangerous *actual* reading and listening (the kind that involves sounding and hearing) was understood to be in the development of literary critical judgement as a discipline-specific method.

There are few works of criticism that have had a more pervasive impact on the study and teaching of literature than I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929/1956). Richards offered the book "to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read" (3). The first 170 pages of the study consist of chapters that gather and analyze opinions of anonymous student readers on thirteen unidentified poems. In effect, Richards was listening to what students thought and felt about the poems he presented to them in advance of his lectures, on a weekly basis. The next 170 pages consist of his analysis of what the one hundred students surveyed said about their experience of reading the poems, with the aim of identifying difficulties in comprehension and, ultimately, of articulating and outlining some protocols for a method of reading and interpreting poetry (173–81). An important episode in the history of literary criticism, to be sure, *Practical Criticism* also represents a significant instance in a longer history of literary listening as articulated in criticism, due to its serious consideration of how poetry should sound when it is read well.

It is in chapter 4 of *Practical Criticism*, the chapter on "Poetic Form," that Richards outlines with some specificity how one is supposed to listen to poetry. Formal appreciation is in great part equivalent, in Richards's mind, to appreciating rhythm and so becomes a problem of entrainment in listening. While good examples of speaking verse may assist, Richards aims to outline key principles and techniques for literary listening to help prevent the adoption of false methods of appreciation which, he felt, were being spread through the adoption of false principles of interpretation, and by bad readers. As he writes: "It may be that the best way to learn how verse should be spoken is to listen to a good speaker; but a few reasonable ideas upon the matter can certainly assist, and without them we remain unnecessarily at the mercy of any authoritative mangler of verses we may encounter" (215). It is an interesting moment of speculation about the pedagogical potential of speaking verse, as compared to the articulation of "reasonable ideas" and practical principles of criticism. While he does have

recommendations on what to listen to later in the chapter (I'll get to that), the point here is to substitute critical reasons and methods for good sonic examples. Richards thus proceeds in outlining some of the most important protocols for wrong and right listening. First, he provides an account of how the listening capacities of students, from an early age, are mostly corrupted by an application of principles from Latin verse composition to lessons in the appreciation of rhythm, leading to protocols of listening that are "damaging" because they promote "the notion that *regularity* is the merit of verse" (215). Since it is, Richards says, a "patent fact that the best verses are frequently irregular," this assumption in protocol is destructive of proper literary listening.

Listening and sound remain the primary preoccupations throughout Richards's chapter on poetic form. As he moves into an argument about the importance of hearing the sounds of words in relation to their meanings, he explores the point by imagining "ourselves reciting verses into the ear of an instrument designed to record (by curves drawn on square paper) all the physical characters of the sequences of sounds emitted, their strength, pitch, durations, and any other features we choose to examine" (216). The true power of sound in poetry ("the inherent rhythm"), and of poetry itself, is heard and understood fully "*when it works in conjunction with sense and feeling*" (221). This is the primary point of Richards's argument about literary form (so, in a sense, we're back to Pope again). Richards aims to contradict the "mystery and obscurity" that has developed around the relationship between "Form and Content" or "Matter in the Form" by reminding us "how natural and inevitable their co-operation must be" (221–22). The naturalness and inevitability of hearing this fact about poetry, how it works, what it is, depends on correct listening by a literary critic whose hearing has not been damaged by faulty critical protocols (like the association of regularity with good rhythm) and, especially, by modes of bad reading.

Richards concludes his chapter on poetic form by returning to the threat that reading (out loud) can pose to the formation of the literary critic as a sensitive and clear-hearing listener and judge of literature. This return to reading also represents the moment when Richards puts a muzzle on it as an oral, critical practice. The previous, extensive reference to sonic examples and techniques in this chapter on literary form are rendered metaphorical, or otherwise are dismissed from the public domain, reduced instead to a potential, private step in the process of working out a true understanding of a poem by "entering into" it, as is necessary for

proper critical judgement. Bad reading is a more likely outcome than good and thus makes all reading out loud too risky to be worth pursuing:

By bad reading I suggest that we should mean not so much reading that would offend our susceptibilities if we were listening, as reading that prevents the reader himself from entering into the poem. The sounds most people make when they read aloud probably seem very different to their audience and to them. The phenomena of “projection” are noticeable here. We invest our rendering with the qualities we wish it to have—unless some critical eye is cocked upon us—and two readings of the same poem that sound very different may not, to the readers themselves, be after all so unlike. The rhythms they *ascribe* to the poem may be more similar than the rhythms they actually succeed in giving it. Thus though private reading aloud is much to be recommended as an aid in working out the form of a poem, it is doubtful whether public reading (in the classroom for example) should be encouraged. Nothing more easily defeats the whole aim of poetry than to hear it incompetently mouthed or to struggle oneself to read out a poem in public before it has given up most of its secrets. (222)

Despite this closing dismissal of reading as a method of performing the results of literary critical judgement, Richards’s ambivalence about the relative status (metaphorical or actual) that sound and listening should have in the methods we use to study literature persists even in the final footnotes of the chapter. In the first of these two ending notes, Richards remarks that while most “gramophone records yet available” are “exceedingly bad” and “would justify in a sensitive child a permanent aversion from poetry,” there is at least one set of recordings, made by John Drinkwater for the International Education Society and released by the Columbia Gramophone in 1928, that Richards says “deserves honorable mention” (222, fn. 6). These recordings on “The Speaking of Verse,” fascinating to listen to and analyze, represent a continuation of this episode in the history of literary listening, in another format and another form, and suggest that Richards was not ready to relinquish the possibility of teaching people to listen to literature by reading to them well. It is an irresistible fantasy for the transmission of cultural sensibility that he might only hope for, but it ultimately must be safely confined to the scenario of “private reading aloud” which is valuable, as the last note to the chapter explains, “because movements of the organs of speech (with muscular and tactile images of them) enter into the ascribed *sound* of words almost as much as auditory



sensations and images themselves" (222, fn. 7). That is, the physical mechanism of reading out loud is as much a part of how we ascribe meaning to the sound of poetry, of how we apprehend a poem's meaning, as hearing, sensing, and understanding.

This one small part of a longer critical episode reveals the complexity that an account of literary studies from the historical perspective of sound and listening entails and suggests that one critical narrative in the long story of literary listening may tell of two long-lasting, concurrent desires of literary encounter. One desire seeks to embrace literature as something that best lends itself to apprehension through methods of sounding and listening. The other seeks to extricate sound and listening (and perhaps, by extension, the intimacy of other kinds of exchange and communication that involve presence) from the scenario of literary study. The latter desire to extricate sound and listening from the scenario of literary study seems particularly "disciplinary" in its motivation, as the extrication is sought to remove sources of damage and corruption to literary appreciation to the extent that literary criticism may justifiably claim its status as a legitimate discipline of knowledge, with established principles of literary judgement. It may be that an interesting technique for contemporary literary listening can be discovered through acts of listening that ride the contradictions of this concurrence, insofar as these contradictory desires are localized manifestations of more abstract critical desires to hear the past in the present, to feel presence in absence, to know and feel the literary as it is here and now, as it was, and as it will be.

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