‘SECONDARY VOCALITY’ AND THE SOUND DEFECT

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Abstract
The place of the reader’s rather than the author’s voice, the sounding summoned by text in tapping the very nature of alphabetic and thus phonetic language, is a vocal spacing-out (and overlap) of writing that differs from Walter Ong’s concept of “secondary orality” in that it is primary to reading itself, not just to recording and transmission. This phonetic mobilization of word forms is found programmatically activated in modern literary writing from Romanticism forward. Its effects, its “sound defects”, are tested here with theoretically framed examples from Schiller to George Eliot, where mishearing becomes a productive re-shearing of word breaks in the generative slippage and drift of the “phonotext”. Out of what Friedrich Kittler would call this Romantic “discourse network”, or what Mladen Dolar might accept as this return of body to language from the outside in, emerges what Giorgio Agamben repeatedly stresses, in his poetics, as the keeping alive of language in what it articulates – or, in other terms borrowed from Agamben, the present “potential” of meaning otherwise. This is an “auraliterity” often transacted by the object voice when desubjectified, detached from intention, and set free in the channels of subvocal activation, which is to say in the event of “evocalization”.

Introduction
The material support of literature is not just the province of book studies but of linguistics as well. Writing is made of impressed letters as much as a page is made of cellulose. Both text and its backing texture, of course,
have in different senses their fibrous weave. But only the former is strung – and can be silently plucked – like a lyre. Not for nothing is listen an anagram of silent. Under cover of fixity, letters sometimes say more than they’re supposed to, more than they are posited and emplaced for. Literature cannot therefore be understood as applying some automatic mute button to speech. Rather, it dials pronunciation down only to the syllabic decibels of subvocal latency. So that both writing and the book, the art of letters and the manufacture of its conveyance, are, friendly or not, user-dependent. Writing is as interactive as is the book object – and not just in its meaning but in its means; not just in sign function but in its audio/visual signals.

Secondary vocality is one name for this – in fact bodily –interaction. In Western languages, subvocal enunciation, a neuromuscular event, is required to instrument a page’s visible alphabetic clusters as phonetic cues – just as, in the reign of the Western codex, the work of the hand as well as eye is needed to make the book instrumental. Toppling the monopoly of the codex page, digitization has of course drastically altered that latter instrumentation – including the reversion by new media to a strictly metaphoric “scrolling” – without substantially affecting the former. In the event of standard-issue reading, offline books are not the only platforms that still need text. Further, even in the traditional bound format, each level of material base, writing as well as page, has its physical (or physiological) complement, its further palpable “support”: literature, its adjunct in triggered if “inhibited” voice (the technical term from neurology); the codex, in hinged assemblage and its manual operation. Violence to the latter (whether sculptural or vandalistic) may “demediate” the former as text, leaving only the book form as vestigial object; violence within the former, or say extreme lexical deviance, unsettles its semantic operations without cancelling them.¹

This second mode of disruption happens all the time in contingent rather than wilful “misreading” – most revealingly in those phrasal misfires endemic to literary density itself and its cognitive ambushes. And

¹ These differing scales of violence, to and within texts respectively, are the subjects of my last two studies: Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2011, and Novel Violence: A Narratography of Victorian Fiction, Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2009.