Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm (eds.)

*Sound Is/As Sense: Essays on Modern British and Irish Poetry*

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It is by no means novel to insist that a thorough interpretation of a literary text must examine both its semantic content and formal components. Samuel Beckett in 1929, for instance, argues that deciphering the often nonsensical textual landscapes of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* requires close attention to how form enacts the text’s content. Summarizing his point, Beckett writes the oft-repeated phrase: «form is content, content is form.»¹

Barely two decades later, the American poet Charles Olson echoes Beckett in his seminal essay «Projective Verse,» asserting, à la Robert Creeley, that «FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.»² Following the claims of Beckett and Olson, a literary text cannot therefore be interpreted on the grounds of its sense—or apparent lack thereof—alone, but rather necessitates a rigorous investigation of the interplay between form (including variations of line, rhythm, sound and meter) and content.

While the discussion of how form and content intermingle within the chemistry of a literary text might now appear common, editors Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm nonetheless reinvigorate this conversation within the field of British and Irish poetry in their recently published collection of essays titled *Sound Is/As Sense*. Drawing upon a selection of papers given at the 2010 ESSE Conference, Görtschacher and Malcolm offer a diverse collection of criticism that demonstrates time and again that, as the title of the volume suggests, the sonic elements of the poem contribute to—and perhaps even constitute—the sense of the poem. The resonances between the claims of Beckett and Olson

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with that of Görtschacher and Malcolm are unquestionable, and yet at the same time the overarching thesis of their project does not merely reiterate the common battle cries of modern and postmodern poetics. Rather, Görtschacher and Malcolm’s collection reignites the necessity for formally- and sonically-concerned modes of interpretation, taking as its exigence the recent tendency in criticism to «avoid the technical» and focus primarily on «the contextual and the thematic» elements of a poem.3 As Görtschacher and Malcolm contend in their introduction to the volume, «[i]f you don’t read a poem for the sound, if you don’t analyze the technique (or form, or whatever you want to call it), you’re only doing half your job and you will be missing a lot of what the poem is doing. If you don’t pay attention to the sound, you’ll miss the sense.»4 The hypothesis of Görtschacher and Malcolm, therefore, is not by any means repetitive, but rather a polemic against common modes of interpretation and a legitimization of poetic forms, and especially their sonic elements, as fertile sources of meaning that demand critical attention.

The insight of Görtschacher and Malcolm resounds throughout Sound Is/ As Sense and, perhaps most prominently, in David Attridge’s notable essay, «Sound Reading: Don Paterson’s Lyric Principle,» in which he argues that «patterned sounds invite attention to the meaning, and the semantic surprise invites us to savour the sound.»5 Not unlike Attridge, Görtschacher’s own contribution, «Slitting the Poem’s Throat to See What Makes It Sing: Sound/Sense Maps in Paula Meehan’s Poetry,» reasserts the immediate need for recent literary criticism to consider the «synthesis of the What and How.»6 Implicit within both of these scholars’ arguments is a challenge to the more suggestively superficial methodologies of conventional literary criticism. In other words, the readings of these scholars—and of others featured throughout the volume—actively disrupt the tendency to privilege the ideas of a poem over its sonic qualities. This deconstruction of the sound-sense binary reveals that these categories are neither mutually exclusive, nor identical, but rather that they co-mingle, entangle, enmesh, and depend upon the existence of the one another. This mode of analysis, therefore, extends the field of potential sense-making and forces critics to re-consider and re-theorize how poems generate meaning. Such methodologies of this criticism include outlining sound patterns and repetitions (including alliteration, consonance, and assonance), tracing echoes, scanning altering stresses, and reading deviances in syntax, all while keeping an eye to the social, cultural, and political implications of these variant sonic occasions.

The multiplicity of methodological approaches parallels the diversity of critics and subject matters presented throughout Sound Is/ As Sense. Reaching far beyond the focus of British and Irish poetry, the heterogeneous assortment of essays presented by Görtschacher and Malcolm speaks to the fertile ground of sonically-concerned criticism. Alongside the aforementioned articles by Attridge and Görtschacher stand many notable projects, such as Bartosz Wójcik’s investigation of Kei Miller’s poetry within the rich aural tradi-

3. Sound Is/ As Sense, ed. Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcom (Gdánsk University Press: Gdánsk, 2016), 9
4. Sound Is/ As Sense, 18.
5. Attridge «Sound Reading: Don Paterson’s Lyric Principle,» 35,
6. Gort «Slitting the Poem’s Throat to See What Makes It Sing: Sound/Sense Maps in Paula Meehan’s Poetry,» 95
tion of Caribbean verse, Vincent Broqua’s tracking of «musical ghosts» through the «non-sensical texture» of Harryette Mullen’s experimental rewritings of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and Martina Pfeiler’s ingenious reading of the importance of United States media culture within the work of American rapper and slam poet Saul Williams. Other noteworthy scholars featured in Sound is/ As Sense include David Malcolm himself and his colleague Tomasz Wiśniewski, who both undeniably extend their exemplary work at the Between.Pomiedzy Foundation to their readings of the significant voices of modern British and Irish poetry, including the likes of Roy Fuller, R.S. Thomas, Dylan Thomas, and Michael Hofman.

There are very few critiques that can be levelled against Görtschacher and Malcolm’s project. Yet, if a criticism must be made, then it is perhaps worth mentioning the long list of poets—particularly within the American tradition—whose work readily reinforces the thesis that sound is sense. One only needs to consider the colliding rhythms of Susan Howe’s collage poems, the sonic Catullus translations of Louis and Cecilia Zukofsky, the jazz-inspired works of Amiri Baraka, Nathaniel Mackey, and Fred Moten, the language poetry of Steve McCaffery, and the sonically rich poetics of recent Feminist writers Cecilia Vicuña and Caroline Bergvall. However, rather than arguing that the scope of Görtschacher and Malcolm’s project was not inclusive enough, it is perhaps more productive to suggest that this list of poets merely highlights the multitude of areas in which the relationship between sound and sense must still be investigated.

Regardless of this minor criticism, Görtschacher and Malcolm’s Sound Is/ As Sense proves to be a vital collection to anyone interested in not only how a poem’s sound contributes to its sense, but even more broadly to any student of modern, postmodern, or contemporary poetry who is interested in interrogating lines between form and content. Indeed, this publication continually demonstrates how the most difficult and/or imperceptible moments of the poem are nonetheless some of the most productive horizons for literary criticism. Certainly, its success should provoke great excitement for the next publication co-edited by Görtschacher and Malcolm, the forthcoming Blackwell Companion to British and Irish Poetry, 1960-2010. With this anticipatory nod to the future in mind, this review closes with recalling a few brief lines that immediately come after Beckett’s famous conflation of form with content: «[Joyce’s] writing is not about something; it is that something itself […] When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep […] When the sense is dancing, the words dance.» And, of course, when sense is sound, sound is sense.

7. Vincent Broqua, «Close-reading Analysis of Some Aspects of Rhythm and Sound in Harryette Mullen’s Parodies of Shakespeare, or the Poetics of Muzak and Soner,» Sound Is/ As Sense, 40 and 55.