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Sound-Repetitions and Sense, or How to Hear Tennyson

Adam Piette

Derrida tackles the issue of sound-effects head on when he looks at some “unintentional” rhymes in a Mallarmé letter to Cazalis, and goes on to define the fundamental ambiguity in any echoic style:

Les effets de grotte sont le plus souvent des effets de glotte, traces laissées d'un écho, empreintes d'un signifiant phonique sur un autre, production de sens selon les retentissements d'une double paroi. Deux sans un. Un toujours en plus, soit en moins. Ambiguïté décisive et indécidable du syntagme “plus de” (supplément et vacance). (306-307)

Derrida's own prose plays the same ambiguous game: “grotte” shifts to “glotte,” temporarily miniaturizing the echo-chamber down to the cave of the mouth, with any textual echoes off the face of the world reduced to the chance repetitions in voice-production. “Sens” finds its killing opposite in “sans.” The *s*-run in the last sentence very cleverly brings to the fore the fact that you need to *hear* the final *s* in “plus” to know whether it means “supplément” or “vacance.” Sound-effects on the printed page are, for Derrida, undecidably ambiguous: “meant for the whispered, not even whispered, merely mental performance of the closet, the study,” as Hopkins put it¹, they pull both ways. The possibility of not hearing them, like not hearing the *s* at the end of “plus,” crosses any supplementary meaning they produce (if heard) with its negation.² Similarly, the

¹ Letter to Everard Hopkins, 5 Nov. 1885, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Letters*, ed. Catherine Phillips, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, 218.

² In this, Derrida is in keeping with his subject, Mallarmé. Discussing the new

repetition of an acoustic signifier in a subsequent word will tend to create *something else* (“production de sens selon les retentissements d’un double paroi”) – $1+1=2$ – but equally it will reduce the sense of the two words brought together to the mere repetition of the phoneme – $1+1=1,1$.

The “double paroi” in Derrida’s sentence is a clever elaboration of the “grotte-glotte” metaphor – the walls of the textual cave, or the interior of the glottal chamber, resound with the traces of the echo, but where is the original cry? The “grotte-glotte” sounds like or resounds like Plato’s cave. One finds echoes, traces, imprints of an original uttered sound in the sound-repetitions on the printed page, the “something else” created by rhyme; but the absence of that something reduces the words to mere carriers of untraceable acoustic trace-elements. This insight is fundamental to his critique of what he called in “+ R” “une théorie mimétique et hypercratyléenne du langage.”³ His own language games are out to prove “l’outrance même pour toute sommation lexicologique, toute taxinomie de thèmes, tout déchiffrement du sens” (309). And one cannot deny that he has discovered a serious difficulty here, once one unpacks the comic energy of Derrida’s prose. Put simply, it is the problem of the undecidability of sound-repetitions in this strict sense: it is difficult to decide whether sound effects *concentrate* our acoustic attention on certain senses in the words by their density and voiced accent, or whether they *disperse* attention by emptying the words of semantic importance.

David Masson, in a series of articles in the fifties, created a new and complex taxonomy of the various ways phoneme-repetition can occur. Far from being atoms of undecideability within discourse, sound-repetitions for Masson are scientifically verifiable and are a new critical key to hidden

innovation of rhyming the *s* of plurals with the *s* of the second person singular as an example of how poetry works for the eye, Mallarmé goes on: “*S*, dis-je, est la lettre analytique; dissolvante et disséminante, par excellence.” For Mallarmé, though, the silent *s* sound is a kind of proof of “une secrète direction confusément indiquée par l’orthographe et qui concourt mystérieusement au signe pur général qui doit marquer le vers.” For Derrida, almost self-evidently, such “rhyming” ambiguities prove the precise opposite, a self-cancelling doubling that reveals an impure, particular case of phonemic accident. See Stéphane Mallarmé, “Notes: 1895,” *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Pléiade, 1945, 855.

³ *La Vérité en peinture*, Paris: Flammarion, 1978, 199.

structures and textual felicities. Here is a condensed version of that taxonomy:

<i>start-echoes (c-/c-)</i>	sound-repetitions in initial position (<u>c</u> ourt . . . <u>c</u> ase)
<i>end-echoes (-c/-c)</i>	repeated final sounds (ca <u>t</u> . . . mi <u>n</u> t)
<i>simple echoes</i>	repeated sound is a single phoneme (ba <u>ck</u> . . . ta <u>k</u>)
<i>compound echoes</i>	repeated sound is two or more phonemes (<u>str</u> ict . . . <u>str</u> ange)
<i>outflow-echoes (cv/cv)</i>	initial syllable-sound the same (<u>f</u> irst . . . <u>f</u> irmly)
<i>inflow-echoes</i>	terminal syllable-sound the same (sta <u>nd</u> . . . ha <u>nd</u>)
<i>solid-echoes (cvc/cvc)</i>	repetition of whole syllable (<u>pa</u> in . . . <u>pa</u> ne)
<i>frame-echoes</i>	repeated initial and terminal consonant with vowel-modulation (<u>st</u> aid . . . <u>st</u> ood)
<i>grid-echoes</i>	polysyllabic frame-echoes ("they had <u>seen</u> her <u>dying</u> and saw <u>nothing</u> left to <u>do</u> ")
<i>tag-echoes</i>	repeated unstressed words (articles, pronouns, suffixes, prefixes etc.) ("I saw <u>her</u> do <u>herself</u> in")
<i>cap-echoes</i>	prefix tag-echoes (<u>in</u> different, <u>in</u> considerate)
<i>spur-echoes</i>	suffix tag-echoes (con <u>str</u> iction, con <u>str</u> action)
<i>elements</i>	generic term for the phonemes being repeated
<i>element-groups</i>	repeated phoneme-cluster in same order ("the <u>car</u> <u>sw</u> erved off the <u>rou</u> ndabout into the <u>kerb</u> of the road")
<i>motif</i>	repeated element-group
<i>augmented element-groups</i>	when other words in context contain phonemes of element-group

<i>sequence</i>	element-groups repeated throughout passage (i.e. finding failure/feel/flushing/full in same passage)
<i>chiasmus</i>	switch in a pair of phonemes (white tide)
<i>interchange</i>	sequence with switches (carried across a dark roaring cave)
<i>knot</i>	scattered elements tighten into one (“tried to strip as he passed”)
<i>patterned assonance</i>	vowel modulation with chiasmic pattern (“when winter wept its damp”)

There are obvious difficulties with this list. Firstly, it seems to me to place too much emphasis on strict order in the appearance of phonemes, so that his element-groups, for example, must repeat the phoneme-cluster in the right order, otherwise the sound-repetitions must go under other names; in Masson's case, “chiasmus,” “interchange,” “switching” and “knotting.” It does not appear to be worthwhile differentiating between a perfect element-group and a sequence that has switched, interchanged and knotted elements. Masson was looking out for perfect structures, like a scientist sieving earth for crystals, but most sound-repetition *is* earthy, i.e. inextricably involved with the obliquities of language, of things being said.

A couple of lines from Tennyson, “Do we indeed desire the dead/Should still be near us at our side?”⁴, chosen entirely at random, would, according to Masson's taxonomy, contain start-echoes (desire-dead), end-echoes (dead-side), simple echoes (still-us), compound echoes (desire-side), frame-echoes (indeed-dead), an element-group (desire-dead . . . side), an augmented element-group (latter augmented by d-repetitions), a chiasmus (still-us at), an interchange (d-d-d-d-z-d-d-s-s-d), knotting (desire-dead-still knotted into side), and patterned assonance

⁴ *In Memoriam*, LI, II. 1-2.

(indeed-desire-be-side)⁵. Clearly, some cleaning up needs to be done. I would suggest taking seriously Masson's emphasis on repeated *groups* of sound-repetitions, but without falling into the trap of over-naming, or over-concern with the fact that they are in the same order. For the purposes of this paper, I will christen the entire bundle of different complex effects, of sequencing, interchange, knotting, augmented elements and patterned assonance, *Masson-patterns*. The real difficulty remains the basic undecideability of repeated elements raised by Derrida; whether, that is, one can ever tell whether the sound-repetitions in lines of Tennyson, for instance, are concentrating or dissipating the senses of the words, or whether they are doing both and therefore creating the dreaded "supplément."

I would like to propose a double reading of sound-repetitions that need not, it seems to me, be collapsed into Derridean undecideable text. The first instance I would like to look at is from poem CXXIII *In Memoriam*, where repetition as such is an important factor both semantically and poetically:

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
 O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
 There where the long street roars, hath been
 The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow 5
 From form to form, and nothing stands;
 They melt like mist, the solid lands,
 Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

But in my spirit will I dwell,
 And dream my dream, and hold it true; 10
 For though my lips may breathe adieu,
 I cannot think the thing farewell.

Tennyson is saying you cannot possibly believe in the continuity of your

⁵ For Masson, triphthongs and diphthongs can echo each other if the diphthong element of the triphthong is the same. Also, he hears sound-repetition across pairs such as *s* and *z*.

affections when even the very solid earth on which you stand has undergone a vast series of evolutionary changes, but that even knowing this, a person mourning a dead loved one will hold to the dream of an unchanging affective environment. As such, the poem is about repetition set against unceasing change. Semantically, the straight repetitions, “form to form” and “dream my dream,” play out the two ways one can read repetitions; as flow of successive states (absolute change from form to different form) and as holding true to the original by repeated effort (dream of continuity). What complicates the simple structure of the poem is the presence of heavy sound-repetitions throughout. The first stanza insists on a /stri:/ Masson-pattern. The second has heavy Masson-patterns on /fmlt/ and /ləudz/. The last stanza plays on a strong *d*-run and the “thing”-“think” jingle augmented by a noticeable *i*-string. Not all of these effects are rhyme-generated; they constitute the rich undertone of internal rhyming.

These patterns are perfectly double. They, in a hidden self-reflexive relation, act as little facsimiles of what is being said. They flow, are shadowy in the sense that they shadow one’s semantic grasp of the movement of the lines, and they melt away like mist once the eye predominates. Tennyson’s internal Masson-patterns liquefy the words they constitute, creating acoustic flow and rapid shifts of sonic form, but in rough parallel with the sense. At the same time, they can be read with the ear predominant, out loud and luxuriously on the tongue. Sound-resemblances then weave an acoustic texture that emphasizes continuity. “There rolls the deep where grew the tree”: though the sense is stressing enormous, radical change, the sounds of the line dreamily and formally repeat themselves – /eə-r-ə-i:/, /eə-r-ə-i:/. The syntax supports this epigrammatic rapprochement. The fact that the sound-repetitions can be read both ways, though, need not lead to a deconstructive conclusion. For Tennyson’s poem is precisely concerned with dream holding true through radical change in form. The dream on the technical level is the dream of a monotonous rhyming base to the poem, holding true to repeated sounds across the gulf of different syntactical forms and different words and their different senses. At the same time, the change in form occurs inevitably, so that a repeated phoneme does and must change radically according to the word in which it finds itself. Tennyson resolves the undecideability of the possible sense and senselessness of sound-repetitions by writing poems with controlled double senses. This is no hypercratylan trick, though;

simply a double set of concerns, phonosemantic and semantic, laid in rough parallel, roughly doing comparable work. The poem is about language change and the shadowy nature of the signifier as much as it is about the relations between the affections and evolutionary circumstances.

If there is something mad about such double-dealing, then Tennyson is aware of it. The monodrama *Maud* bears precarious witness to the cracked obsessiveness that might go along with repeating oneself too much. The voice in *Maud* is madly aware of the terrible sense of his own madness that lurks within his own senseless repetitions. Towards the end of the poem, he dreams himself dead and buried beneath the pitiless London streets:

Dead, long dead,
 Long dead!
 And my heart is a handful of dust,
 And the wheels go over my head,
 And my bones are shaken with pain,
 For into a shallow grave they are thrust.
 Only a yard beneath the street,
 And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
 The hoofs of the horses beat,
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,
 With never an end to the stream of passing feet.

(*Maud*, II.V.i. 239-249; Ricks 574-575)

The beat of the horses' hooves gives a mad sense to the obsessive repetitiousness of sound and rhythm – they articulate the mental stress at the same time as they judge it to be crazily and empty all in the mind. The sound-repetitions are arranged around the over-emphatic “beat”-“street”-“feet” rhymes so as at once to perfectly mime the repetitive beat of the mad pulse in the brain and also to acknowledge the sheer derangement of the rhyming overkill.

What complicates this extraordinary display of rhythmic and rhyming repeats is that they recall, and therefore themselves repeat, a long series of similar rhyming occasions in the poem. The “beat”-“street”-“feet” rhymes in II.V.i. in fact constitute the final manifestation of the most important rhyming motif in the poem. It begins in I.V.iii. when the I-voice listens to Maud singing of Death by the cedar tree in the meadow. It is as a voice that he falls in love with her: “Still! I will hear you no more,/For your sweetness hardly leaves me a choice/But to move to the meadows and fall

before/Her feet on the meadow grass, and adore,/Not her, who is neither courtly nor kind,/Not her, not her, but a voice." (I.V.iii. 184-189; Ricks 531). The internal rhyme "sweetness"- "feet" emerges out of an initial obsession with the loved one as voice, as deathly echo. In the dreadful hollow where his father had committed suicide, Echo answers "Death" to every question. Maud's voice echoes Echo with her martial song, and that coincidental repetition finds itself imitated by the narcissistic echoic style with its deadly lack of choice. Like Maud's face, which grows and fades and grows upon the I-voice like the tide upon "a maddened beach,"⁶ her voice creates a maddening, suicidal beat within his mind, within *his* voice. The little "sweetness"- "feet" suggestion sparks into a dominating rhyme in the next section, nine lines later: "Whom but Maud should I meet/Last night, when the sunset burned/On the blossomed gable-ends/At the head of the village street/Whom but Maud should I meet?/And she touched my hand with a smile so sweet" (I.VI.ii. 196-201; Ricks 532). The mad inevitability of their meeting, stressed by the ballad-repetition of the question, engenders the tight little fatuousness of the meeting of the rhyme words.

The very ludicrousness of the cliché "meet"- "sweet" rhymes is a menace within the poetic voice. The fact that they may have originated in the echoic shock he suffered when he heard Maud sing his father's suicide may give them a vicious, sarcastic tone. How you read those rhymes depends on how effectively you read them as a motif, bringing violently differing contexts together. The sarcastic tone begins to come clear when the motif establishes itself at II.VI.x, which cynically rhymes "meet"- "sweet" with "deceit"- "cheat" within a stanza that begs that Maud be all that she seems. But it is balanced against the morbidly sentimental reading in the eighth section, where he sees Maud in church being wept over by an angel: "she lifted her eyes,/And suddenly, sweetly, strangely blushed/To find they were met by my own;/And suddenly, sweetly, my heart beat stronger/And thicker" (I.VII. 305-309; Ricks 536-537). The "beat" of the motif may, then, be read as madly emotional, the overheated repetitiousness of a racing heart, or as sarcastically, ludicrously pseudo-poetic, the voice savagely parodying its own rhyming sweetnesses and meetings of sound. Echo's song may be pure heartfelt lament, or the empty fiction of Narcissus.

⁶ I.III. 96-99; Ricks 526.

The motif reemerges, significantly, within the most notoriously "poetic" section of the poem, the flower song "Come into the garden, Maud." Tennyson, by the way, hated the Victorian sentimentalizing of this section, complaining that "Come into the garden, Maud" "had, and was intended to have, a taint of madness"; he hated the waltz to which the poem was "made to dance": "Nothing fit for it but the human voice" (Ricks 560):

She is coming, my own, my sweet;
 Were it ever so airy a tread,
 My heart would hear her and beat,
 Were it earth in an earthy bed;
 My dust would hear her and beat,
 Had I lain for a century dead;
 Would start and tremble under her feet,
 And blossom in purple and red.

(I.XXII.xi. 916-924; Ricks 563)

The singing mind is going wrong, singing itself to death, rhyming itself to abject slave obeisance, burying itself beneath the mad rhythmical regularities, the purple passages and blood-red melodrama of its flower imagery. The "sweet"-*"beat"*-*"beat"*-*"feet"* rhymes hold the stanza tightly within the confines of their cliché dead resonances. He is going mad from the very deathliness of his flowery poeticisms. At the same time, the return of the motif recalls the other contexts, the relations between his fascination with her singing voice and his father's suicide, between his religious, heartfelt ecstasy about her and the queasiness he feels about his own lying poetic voice and her possible infidelity. The motif is the expression of sound-repetitions as the process of evacuation of significance: as such, the I-voice is dying from Victorian poetasting morbidity and sentimentality. And it is also the expression of sound-repetitions as accumulation of significances: the motif instances brought together prove that he is singing an echo of her echoic voice in order to kill himself in an act of high egoistical surrender to his father's image. The beat of the sound-repetitions is dead and dusty; at the same time, it mimes the start and tremble of the heart.

The suicidal voice rings "in my heart and my ears, till I die, till I die,"⁷

⁷ II.I.35; Ricks 565.

haunting the poem like an ambiguous ghost. His “pulses beat” and he cannot tell if the voice is a “lying trick of the brain.”⁸ The relation between the pulse of the blood through the heart and the poem’s rhythmical regularities may also be a lying trick, or a sign of emotional sincerity. Similarly, the motif may *stand for* either poetic trick or symptom of a beating heart. The fact is, depressingly and maddeningly, that *all* poetic clichés and conventions may be said to derive their force from the myth of origins in blood and heartbeat, but the fact that the heart is thought to be anything more than just a pump is itself a function of poetic cliché and convention. The heart’s regular beat is the dubious source of all repetition: mechanical pump methodically keeping a body regular and alive, and emotional source of the rhythm of all passion. In *Maud*, the heart is both at the same time, and the acknowledgment of both pump repetition and passionate beat drives the mind mad. The ghost of Maud dissolves into the ghost of his dead father as the echoic motif develops: “When I was wont to meet her/In the silent woody places/By the home that gave me birth,/We stood tranced in long embraces/Mixt with kisses sweeter sweeter/Than anything on earth” (II.IV.ii. 145-150; Ricks 570). The “meet”-“sweet” motif is sweeter than anything on earth because it recalls the dead beneath their earth. It signals the mad desire for self-destruction in an agony of religious worship of woman as Death, to undo his birth and return to the “dreadful hollow” of his father’s suicide. It also signals the emptily formal repetitiousness of rhyming poetry as such, dreadfully hollow site of identification between voice and dead entrancement. In his mad dream, as he approaches the ghost memory of Maud, the “sweet”-“meet” rhymes accumulate, accompanying the “woodland echo” and Maud’s singing, until the dream turns nasty and is broken by the “passionate cry” of “some one dying or dead.”⁹ He is pursued by the ghost of his father, of his own mad self, through the streets of London:

⁸ II.II. 36-37, Ricks 565. The relationship between the beat of the pulse of the heart, morbidity and a poem’s rhythmical and rhyming regularities is Coleridgean. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. “I closed my lids, and kept them close,/And the balls like pulses beat;/For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky/Lay like a load on my weary eye,/And the dead were at my feet.” (ll. 248-252). Both Coleridge and Tennyson would have been drawn to these relations by their culture’s medieval interests, in particular alliterative verse.

⁹ II.IV.vi.&vii; Ricks 571-572.

But the broad light glares and beats,
 And the shadow flits and fleets
 And will not leave me be;
 And I loathe the squares and streets,
 And the faces that one meets,
 Hearts with no love for me:
 Always I long to creep
 Into some still cavern deep,
 There to weep, and weep, and weep
 My whole soul out to thee.

(II.IV.xii. 229-238; Ricks 573-574.)

The I-voice is shadowed by its own failure to live out its own mad agenda in public: the heartbeat of his passion is transformed into the glaring light of publicity, the sweet meeting of minds into empty encounters with strangers, the heart as origin has been displaced onto the anonymous, indifferent London crowd. All he has left is his dream of suicidal, womb-like retreat, and of plaintive Echo as pure lament (“to weep, and weep, and weep”), suggesting continuity with the /i:ts/ motif of his madness through the /i:/-vowel repetitions. The poem itself is his “still cavern deep,” a place where he can live fitfully as pure dead voice, and where the plangency of his repetitiousness might find a reader fool enough to read it as his “whole soul.” Unfortunately, as he himself acknowledges, “to hear a dead man chatter/Is enough to drive one mad.”¹⁰ Reader as ghost of Maud, reader as maddened listener to a dead man’s chatter: Tennyson has diagnosed the two extreme forms of reading sound-repetitions, and has brought them together, not to reconcile them, but to show their inevitable kinship. In responding “lovingly” to the music of sound-repetitions, we read in heart and pulse and voice. In responding “formally” to their mechanical reproduction, we read them as hollow symptoms of a dying convention.

Masson’s attempt to systematize sound-repetitions into a complex structure of echoes and motifs was, in the end, a *Maud*-like procedure. He had a dream of ghost phonemes that would answer his structural call, and arrange themselves into perfect narcissistic order. But he was right to insist, nevertheless, that writers are concerned with echoes and motifs as such. Derrida’s desire to reduce the issue of repetition to an irreconcilable,

¹⁰ II.V.i. 257; Ricks 575.

and therefore undecideable, hymen between evacuation of sense and accumulation of significance, is also *Maud*-like in its self-destructive urge to create a “still cavern deep” of morbid echoes. He was right, nevertheless, to insist on the “double paroi” of sound-repetitions. Tennyson’s poetry, in pitching memory work (sounds holding true across time) against radical change (phonemes changing their senses through time), in demonstrating the madness of keeping faith simultaneously with repetitive jingles and the repeated motifs of the passionate heart, demonstrates how poets *can* make echoes significant within their cavern: by making sound-repetitions signals of the simultaneous emptiness and significance of the heart and its beat.

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