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On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation by David Nowell Smith

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Till human voices wake us...

***On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* by DAVID NOWELL SMITH**
Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 \$95.00

Reviewed by **REBECCA VARLEY-WINTER**

This book opens with a defence of “voice”:

poems’ soundworlds are constructed out of voice as material or medium; poems display, or stage, or generate, a ‘speaking voice’, or speaking voices, as we readers, silently or aloud, are invited to ‘voice’ a poem. But in these instances, is ‘voice’ really being treated as one single concept, as opposed to, say, a cluster of different conceptual valences centred on one word? (1)

On Voice in Poetry explores these diverse “valences,” moving from Agamben, Derrida, Kristeva, bell hooks, and St. Augustine to Jaap Blonk, Sean Bonney, Lisa Robertson, Keats, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Nowell Smith begins and ends with Hopkins, giving circular coherence, but each chapter is individually “essayistic,” offering a “speculative poetics.” Any account of poetic voice must involve close reading (there is no *universal* voice), and the analyses here are precise and questing.

Chapter One, “A Natural Scale,” compares the mimicry of animal cries in Hopkins’ poetry with accounts of infantile language development from Guy Rosolato, Nicolas Abraham, and Maria Torok, suggesting “that the original impulse for language arises out of interjection, inchoate and immediate cries of need or passion which eventually metamorphose into language as a system of signs” (17).

Are infant cries more or less linguistic than the bleating of sheep? Do animal voices count as language? Nowell Smith quotes from Herder’s *Abhandlung*:

Even the finest instrument strings of animal feeling (I have to use this metaphor because I know no better for the mechanism of feeling bodies)—even these strings, whose sound and straining does not come from volition and slow deliberation at all . . . are directed in their whole play . . . at an expression to other creatures. The struck string performs its natural duty: it sounds!, it calls to a similarly feeling Echo—even when none is there, even when it does not hope or expect to be answered by one. (21)

In this quotation, “animal feeling” becomes lyrically *overheard* in its excess, aimed wildly. Anyone who has overheard a bird caught by a hawk can sense what those cries mean, risking instinctive over-identification with the animal in pain. Nowell Smith observes: “some voices (of frogs and bats) are both confused and unwritable while others (of nightingales, cuckoos) are confused but writable nonetheless. Is birdsong, for instance, music?” St. Augustine thought birdsong too unconscious, too automatic, to be *musica*, yet, as Nowell Smith argues, “does this not say more about the limits of our own knowledge than about writable animal voices?” (37).

Voice always contains both communication and difference: it is *articulated*, divided at the joints. Nowell Smith defines it through this liminality: voices move out of the body, both *of us* and *not us*. In “Vibration and Difference,” he writes of “a *partage* of voices and voicings” (75)—from Jean-Luc Nancy’s phrase *le partage des voix*—and in

“Turnings of the Breath,” he writes that “the rhythms in which we think always precede us, and exceed us.” He argues that poetic prosody points towards a collective voice in the structures of language itself (86-87).

More provocatively, Nowell Smith suggests that “the vocality and orality specific to lyric are engendered by techniques specific to writing”: in effect, that writing is *more lyrical* than song. With the transition from oral to literate culture, the more improvisatory, collective forms of oral epics are usurped by “context-less lyric” and a more precisely determined voice (103). I wondered at this: where is Sappho’s originary lyricism in this account? Are lyric poems ever entirely context-less?

This tension between public and private voicings progresses in “The Multitudinous Tongue,” which explores political voice, particularly through screams. The screams of slaves express protest, without ever entering formalised language: the scream, in its wordless intensity, “has a different meaning depending on its specific historical moment” (115). The enslaved scream becomes cruelly vocalised suppression, silence.

Surprisingly, there are relatively few accounts of individual voices, their textures and timbres, in this book. Why not listen to T. S. Eliot’s readings of *The Waste Land*, Sylvia Plath’s extraordinary reading voice, Billie Holiday’s iconic performance of “Strange Fruit,” or Billie Whitelaw’s embodiment of Beckett’s *Not I*? Nowell Smith rarely touches on such specific performances, focusing more on the page as a source of multiple possible voicings. It is precisely the *openness* of the page that seems to draw him; any one performance must channel particular

tones of voice over others, rather than remaining in a state of potential. For example, he refers to Donne’s line “Grief, which verse did restrain.” Is this voiced as Grief, which *verse* did restrain, or Grief, which *verse did* restrain (but now does not restrain)? (139). What Nowell Smith calls the “double figuring” (155) of poetic voice depends on it *not* being actually vocalised, unless the poem were read by two voices simultaneously or repeated with different emphases. Music might mimic or recreate these kinds of tonal ambiguity, but while Nowell Smith is eloquent about song and performance in a more general sense, little attention is given to songs in their more particular voicings.

However, what *is* explored here is explored brilliantly. In his devotional poetry, can Hopkins overcome the temporality of his own voice to address the timelessness of “God”? “God’s speech is the setting-into-motion of time, yet as it sounds to human ears it must be temporally bounded” (157). For St. Augustine, “true eternity . . . is characterised by never leaving the ‘present’” (160). In attuning to such subtle presences, this is a fascinating work of animation.

REBECCA VARLEY-WINTER completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge, titled *Reading Fragments and Fragmentation: Stéphane Mallarmé, Mina Loy, Hope Mirrlees* (2014). She has published academic articles and reviews in *Literary Imagination*, *PN Review*, *Sabotage Reviews*, and *Glasgow Review of Books*; her poems have appeared most recently in *Poems In Which*. From 2015–2016 she is a Stipendiary Lecturer in English at Keble College, Oxford.