
A Theory of Resonance

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A Theory of Resonance

WAI CHEE DIMOCK is professor of English and American studies at Yale University. Her recent book, *Residues of Justice* (U of California P, 1996), brings together three disciplines—literature, philosophy, and law—to argue for the need to rethink the concept of justice. She is at work on a sequel, “*The Argument of Time*,” on literature, science, and democracy.

THIS ESSAY argues for literature as a democratic institution, vibrant and robust. In making this point, I try to give a new profile to the concepts of historicity and context and to honor the claim of the ear against the primacy of the eye in the West. I also experiment with the languages of the natural sciences to describe the phenomenon called *literature*. The semantic fabric of the text, like the fabric of the universe, can be theorized as a space-time continuum, alive with memory of probabilities, memory of alternatives, and memory of change. To subject the familiar literary object to this unfamiliar description is to redraw the map of interdisciplinarity, to be struck afresh by the resilience of literature, and to be surprised into asking some old questions anew.

How does a literary text sound when it is read twenty years, two hundred years, or two thousand years after it was written? The behavior of words across time—their tendency to undergo subtle or even striking modifications—has long been the province of historical linguistics.¹ The ceaseless passage of time touches language on many registers (syntactic, phonological, morphological), but what is most noticeable is the changes in the webs of meaning surrounding individual words. These semantic webs, broadening, contracting, acquiring new overtones and inflections, bear witness to the advent and retreat of social norms. As time alters the fabric of human association, it also alters the fabric of linguistic usage, the imputable or deployable nuances of words that make possible that association.

This conception of time as a destabilizing force, undermining the integrity of any unit of meaning—a word, a sentence, a literary text—seems to have had little or no influence on the current historical turn in literary studies. Raymond Williams, it is true, some two decades ago proposed a diachronic study of language, examining historical changes through the shifting meanings of 155 “keywords.” However, almost no other theorist has addressed semantic change, either to speculate on historical processes or to consider literary texts as diachronic objects: objects that extend across time, across a temporal gulf between language users. Indeed, “historicism” as it is now practiced rests largely on semantic synchronism: the meaning of a text is assumed to be the property of

the historical period in which it originated; coextensive with that period, it remains undisturbed by anything beyond. The interpretive frame is thus a cross-section of the temporal axis. What such a frame renders salient are relations of simultaneity, between concurrent events, rather than extended relations emerging with time's passage.

To "historicize" in this sense, then, is to impute meanings to a text by situating it among events in the same slice of time. This synchronic model hardly acknowledges that the hermeneutical horizon of the text might extend beyond the moment of composition, that future circumstances might bring other possibilities for meaning. Nor does it recognize that the passage of time, deadening some words and quickening others, can give a past text a semantic life that is an effect of the present, rather than of the age when the text was produced. Indeed, within a synchronic model the search for "historical" meaning is largely indistinguishable from a more old-fashioned search for "original" meaning. The object of inquiry is dated. Its reference points are events that began and ended in its original context. And the task of the critic is to lock that context into place, by locating the historicity in the text and the text in history.

No preposition is more important to a synchronic historicism than the reassuring *in*. But why should a text not be interpreted in relation to events outside its temporal vicinity? Does simultaneity necessarily confer analytic pertinence? Is it not possible to think of historicity as a relation less discretely periodized, one that emerges over time between any text and subsequent generations of readers? The preposition *in*, capturing a literary text only in its pastness, cannot say why this text might still matter in the present, why, distanced from its original period, it nonetheless continues to signify, continues to invite other readings.

Against this background, I want to propose a somewhat different kind of historicism, what I call a diachronic historicism. This approach tries to engage history beyond the simultaneous, aligning it instead with the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time. This long view of history, restoring the temporal axis to literary studies,² allows texts to be seen as objects that do a lot of traveling: across space and especially

across time. And as they travel they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning. Such changes in the registers of reception, making a text continually interpretable, also mean that any particular reading is no more than a passing episode in a history of readings. Diachronic historicism suggests that human beings are finite, bringing short-lived meanings to long-lived words. It intimates that a reading is topical, circumstantial, the effect of an ephemeral existence, and bound to appear obtuse to future readers who, living among other circumstances and sensitized by other concerns, bring to the same words a different web of meaning.

The key concept I propose for diachronic historicism is resonance. This primarily aural and primarily interactive concept offers a helpful analogy for the phenomenon of semantic change. Modeled on the traveling frequencies of sound, it suggests a way to think about what (following Ralph Ellison)³ I call the traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places. A theory of resonance puts the temporal axis at the center of literary studies. Texts are emerging phenomena, activated and to some extent constituted by the passage of time, by their continual transit through new semantic networks, modifying their tonality as they proceed.⁴ The "object" of literary studies is thus an object with an unstable ontology, since a text can resonate only insofar as it is touched by the effects of its travels. Across time, every text must put up with readers on different wavelengths, who come at it tangentially and tendentiously, who impose semantic losses as well as gains. Across time, every text is a casualty and a beneficiary.

The concept of resonance thus reopens the question of the extent to which a text might be said to endure. This is the question Harold Bloom raises trenchantly in his defense of the Western canon: "The issue is the mortality or immortality of literary works." And the immortality of some works, a fixed attribute as far as he is concerned, comes only from their "strength," from a "competitive and triumphant power" that determines their "survival" in a cosmic struggle (34, 25, 36).⁵ As he sees it, every text faces the challenge to "clear [a] space for the self," to overcome its belatedness, and to "ward off

the massive weight of past achievement" (10). Canonicity is the prize won by an assertive linguistic object that, fortifying itself against the burden of time, can claim a time-proof integrity.

A theory of resonance inverts the Bloomian hypothesis, by linking literary endurance not to the persistent integrity of the text but to its persistent unraveling, not to the text's timeless strength but to something like its *timeful* unwieldiness. The note a text resounds comes from its lack of insulation against the currents of semantic change. For every language resembles an echo chamber, the tones and accents of former users interacting with those of subsequent ones. And so meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones. The routes of reference and inference, adumbrated, say, four hundred years ago, are now denser, messier, more thickly crisscrossing, less accessible perhaps, but the tangle need not keep out the intrepid reader. There is no semantic permanence, no eternal relation between a particular word and a particular connotation. This semantic transience makes texts not timeless, not ossified, not proof against the influx of new meanings. Mikhail Bakhtin calls this interactive process a "dialogic" phenomenon.⁶ The dialogue, I want to emphasize, is above all temporal, an interaction between texts and their future readers, complicated by the dynamics of historical change and by the interpretive energies thus released. Semantically elastic, stretched by a growing web of cross-references, often to the point of unrecognizability, a text cannot and will not remain forever the same object.

Seen in a negative light, resonance would seem to stem from the failure of texts to preserve themselves in a fixed shape. Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes this negative sense in "Resonance and Wonder," an essay that discusses the "resonant contextualism" of artifacts in museums (54) and seems to bear also on literary texts. For Greenblatt, resonance represents the danger that comes from the artifact's "openness," its "permeability of boundaries" (43). Artifacts resonated in the past because they were infiltrated by "a larger community of voices" (48). They resonate now because they are subjected to the "corrosive doubt" of today's critics (44). There is an element of the unruly to resonant con-

textualism. And so, acknowledging that "the new historicism has distinct affinities with resonance," he ends up wary of its practice. Indeed, in the perennial "oscillation between homage and desecration" he is now drawn toward the former, toward a celebratory poetics, thus moving "away from resonance and toward wonder" (42, 48, 49).

For Greenblatt, resonance and wonder are antithetical. Moreover, in opposing them, he seems to posit a deeper opposition between two sensory faculties—the visual, aligned with the spell of enchantment, and the aural, aligned with the interference of noise. Against a poetics of resonance, then, Greenblatt proposes a "poetics of wonder" that amounts to a visual ecstasy, meant

not for the hearing of intertwining voices, not for historical memory, not for ethnographic thickness, but for intense, indeed enchanted looking. Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices. (49)

Greenblatt's argument is largely prompted by his association of resonance with "background noise" and by his assumption that noise is distracting, distorting, disruptive of the fragile artifact. For this reason, he wants the artifact to stand forth in "mute eloquence" (44), in a charmed circle free of all contexts and all interfering noises, the object of a rapturous gaze.

Mindful of Greenblatt's warnings, I want nonetheless to make an affirmative case for resonance, claiming it as a desirable (rather than unfortunate) effect of context. I do so, however, only by redefining context as a diachronic relation: extending beyond the originating circumstances of a text and moving on to engage the circumstances that give birth to a semantic life at the moment of reading. This shift of emphasis from original to interpretive context suggests that resonance is a generative (and not merely interfering) process, one that remakes a text while unmaking it, that pays tribute to time both as a medium of unrecoverable meaning and as a medium of newly possible meaning. And so, while Greenblatt celebrates an enchantment primarily visual, I celebrate an enchantment primarily aural. I celebrate it as the work of time, the feat of motion

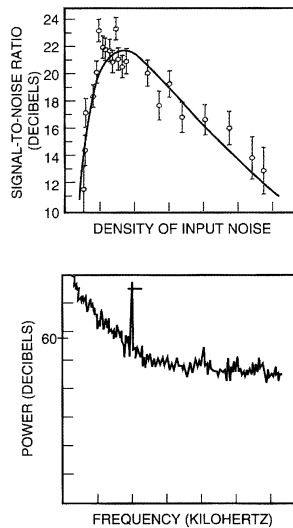
that keeps a text vibrating. And, against Greenblatt's assumption that noise is disruptive, I want to argue that noise is beneficial, that it enriches the dynamics for interpretation. Resonance is not an impediment to wonder but an occasion for it.

This argument is counterintuitive, yet it echoes a recent scientific hypothesis about the beneficial effects of random noise on the detectability of sounds. In a series of essays published in the past few years in *Nature* and *Scientific American* (bearing such titles as "The Benefits of Background Noise"), scientists have called attention to a phenomenon known as stochastic resonance, in which a weak signal is boosted by background noise and becomes newly and complexly audible.⁷ The layering of sounds—the meshing of a faint vibration with other, apparently interfering but effectively enhancing vibrations—gives a new meaning to the study of periodicity and allows a range of otherwise undetectable signals to rise above the threshold of detectability. "Noise is sometimes a bonus rather than a nuisance," the scientists suggest (Moss and Wiesenfeld 66). This hypothesis, they add, has now "crossed disciplinary boundaries" (Wiesenfeld and Moss 33): it "has caused a recent burst of interest in stochastic resonance, not only in physics, engineering and biology but in almost every science where noise and thresholds are encountered" (Moss and Wiesenfeld 66).

As an enhancing presence, altering the dynamics of reception, noise is an apt analogy for my understanding of interpretive context. Noise includes all those circumstances that complicate readers' relations to a text: circumstances that, filling their heads and ringing in their ears, make them uninnocent readers, who encroach on the text with assumptions, expectations, convictions. Noise includes all those circumstances that so quicken the pulse, so sensitiz[e] the interpretive faculties, as to call forth unexpected nuances from words composed long ago. An effect of historical change, noise is a necessary feature of a reader's meaning-making process. And even as it impinges on texts, even as it reverberates through them, it thickens their tonality, multiplies their hearable echoes, makes them significant in unexpected ways.

Noise is the condition for the enduring resonance of texts, not a nuisance that endangers them.

As Thomas Greene argues in *The Vulnerable Text*, an "unprotected" character (100) is a vital "risk that a text assumes insofar as it makes a claim to be literary," an effect of its "haecceity of inflection."⁸ This haecceity of inflection can find its way into receptive ears; it can also find its way into hostile ones. For "the presence of a unique tone itself widens the margin of legitimate interpretive debate" (xiv); the text's "centers of explosive resonance" are easily reducible to gibberish through a wayward hearing (103). The "text does not exist which cannot be parodied" (xiv). And yet the text is never fully demolished: it survives to be received again and to be parodied again. As Greene points



In 1988, physicists at the Georgia Institute of Technology, including Rajarshi Roy, Bruce McNamara, and Kurt Wiesenfeld, demonstrated the phenomenon of stochastic resonance. The addition of an optimal amount of noise boosted a weak periodic signal, resulting in the greatest signal-to-noise ratio (top graph). In the power spectrum of the output (bottom graph), the weak signal, now detectable, appears as a narrow spike rising above a broad background of noise (Moss and Wiesenfeld 67). Graphs: Laurie Grace.

out, the inordinate risks run by literary texts must be seen against “their survival in spite of, or perhaps because of, their risks” (103). Endurance must come not from the superior insulation or airtight acoustics of an inviolate entity but from activation by noise, from ceaseless disturbance and subjection to the currents of change. “Books are often praised for outlasting violence,” Greene says, “but to pretend that their survival exacts no price is to sentimentalize their ‘immortality’” (101). Neither sentimentalizing nor dismissing that immortality, I want to redescribe it as nonintegral survival, marked not by the text’s endurance as a sealed package but by its tendency to fall apart, to pick up noise, to break out in a riot of tongues.

As candidates for nonintegral survival, the diachronic phenomena called *literature* bear the generic mark of incompleteness (Dimock 78–89). Given a domain so deficient in boundaries, the literary can make no claim to an indwelling identity. The literary, in other words, is not an attribute resident in a text, but a relation, a form of engagement, between a changing object and a changing recipient, between a tonal presence and the way it is differently heard over time. In a provisional definition, then, *the literary* might refer to that which resonates for readers past, present, and future. This definition is ruthlessly idealizing—ruthlessly because it makes a nonentity out of what it idealizes. For since readers past, present, and future are not the same reader, a text can remain literary only by not being the same text. It endures by being read differently. Over time, not only does the membership of the literary domain change, but also each text becomes different from itself, suffers a semantic sea change, acquires a freight of new meaning.

Texts might be thought of, then, as nonintegral objects, akin to what W. V. Quine calls “twilight half-entities,” mathematical abstractions he introduces to challenge “the sweeping artificialities of notation in modern logic” (*Word* 158). Such half-entities put pressure on “thing-talk,” the objectifying language human beings develop in early childhood, when they acquire the unfortunate habit of speaking as if all objects were no more than physical, as if each were characterized by a locatable identity and by an individuation of attributes. Against this “individuating, object-oriented conceptual scheme so

natural to us,” Quine argues that attributes should be rejected as the ground for individuation and that “the precept ‘no entity without identity’ might simply be relaxed.” Many objects in the world, Quine points out, are not just physical objects, are not characterized by the secure residence of a particular set of attributes within a particular set of coordinates. They are neither fully formed in space nor fully articulated over time. Rather than reify them, “why not just accept them thus, as twilight half-entities to which the identity concept is not to apply?” (“Speaking” 13–16, 24, 23).

A literary text is a prime example of an object that is not individuated as a fixed set of attributes within fixed coordinates. Indeed, the continual emergence of interpretive contexts suggests that the attributes of a text also continually emerge. Not a finished product, a text is the incomplete expression of a finite language user; moving beyond that finite individual, it becomes a collective potentiality, a force of incipience commensurate with the incipience of humanity. It is this collective dimension of a text that makes its temporal trajectory unforeseeable. And insofar as this trajectory is describable at all, perhaps it is best described as a continuum, registering both extension and transit, changes in time and in attributes. Such a continuum, such extension through motion, makes diachronism an interpretive necessity.

Literary critics can perhaps draw inspiration from modern physicists: from their subtle analysis of motion in terms of a space-time continuum. In particular, I would like to invoke Einstein to articulate something like a “kinematics” of the text, theorizing the text’s continuous movement through time. Einstein provides a basis for this kinematics in his special theory of relativity, especially what he calls the “relativity of simultaneity.”⁹ Time, it seems, passes at different rates for observers in different states of motion. Two clocks that are synchronized and then put into different states of motion will not strike the hour simultaneously. Likewise, a moving observer and a stationary observer will disagree about the sequence of events. Using the example of a moving train on a stationary embankment, Einstein writes:

Events which are simultaneous with reference to the embankment are not simultaneous with respect to the train, and vice versa (relativity of simultaneity). Every reference-body (co-ordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement of the time of an event. (30–31)

“Every reference-body . . . has its own particular time”: with this statement Einstein demolishes the traditional conception of time as an absolute metric that unifies all incidents and chronologies. Rather, time is now a medium for disagreement—for the noncoincidence of events, the nonmeeting of minds. Relativity thus turns classical mechanics on its head. Classical mechanics assumes absolute simultaneity and thus absolute agreement. Challenging this, Einstein writes:

According to the special theory of relativity it is otherwise. The sum total of events which are simultaneous with a selected event exist, it is true, in relation to a particular inertial system, but no longer independently of the choice of inertial system. The four-dimensional continuum is now no longer resolvable objectively into sections, all of which contain simultaneous events; “now” loses for the spatially extended world its objective meaning. It is because of this that space and time must be regarded as a four-dimensional continuum that is objectively unresolvable, if it is desired to express the purport of objective relations without unnecessary conventional arbitrariness. (170)

Einstein’s point is especially resonant as an argument against synchronic historicism: any effort to periodize absolutely, to put a text into a discrete slice of the past, must do violence to its continuous moving and meshing, a process thinkable only through a reciprocal description across time and only by recognizing the problem of agreement attending that reciprocity. Of the many challenges Einstein poses, this kinematic conception of time is surely the most profound. His universe is “objectively unresolvable” because it is a “four-dimensional space-time continuum” (61), because its structure of “happening and becoming” cannot be captured within a single frame of reference (171). Analogously, a literary text is objectively unresolvable because its semantic universe, also a continuum, cannot be contained

in a finite interpretive frame but keeps moving on, risking disagreement with other readers.

Honoring this force of incipience, a diachronic historicism will perhaps see the entire course of human history and all the objects that have come into being with that history as potentially connected, potentially developing significant dialogues.¹⁰ From this perspective, literary texts are to be cherished for the likelihood that they will arrive at new and strange junctures and yield new and strange arguments. And so context is not a fixture or a given, for since the world is a continuum, no object can stand by itself or be exhausted by the relations it entertains at a particular moment. As Einstein says, “[T]o every event there are as many ‘neighbouring’ events (realised or at least thinkable) as we care to choose” (62). A text is finite, but its contexts are countless. The “immortality” of literature must be understood in this sense, as the continual emergence of interpretive contexts, which, being topical, circumstantial, and short-lived, must give way to an ongoing sequence that looks almost infinite from a human perspective.

Besides locating a text in its original context (only one entry to that ongoing sequence), readers might want to dislocate it, relocate it, and line it up against competing voices—the natural sciences, the visual arts, law, economics—to see how it sounds and resounds. Interdisciplinarity is perhaps a logical consequence of this broad definition of context. But if interdisciplinarity reflects a heightened awareness of literary study as a definable field, with a definable object of inquiry, it raises questions about the making and remaking of the institutional protocols, the scope, and the membership of literature.¹¹ In this light, literature reveals itself to be no more than a taxonomic artifact. Still, it is an artifact that names an important (if inconclusive) class of phenomena, what Quine calls a “virtual class,” a putative entity with a variable and unfinished membership (*Set Theory* 15–21).

Indeed, literature is a virtual class that honors a particular kind of human attention. A “four-dimensional space-time continuum,” its semantic universe allows words to keep on resonating and the human ear to learn to become the most marvelous of receptors. Literature, in short, is inseparable from the tonality imputed to it when it is received:

whether as ironic or not ironic, jesting or in earnest, worthy of memorization or denunciable as Muzak. A text can be read only insofar as readers manage to inflect it. And, in hanging so perilously on that inflection, it tunes the ear to what eludes the eye, what is not optically evident from the typographic marks on the page.¹² Literary study makes a large provision for the unvisualizable. It is a field of sensitized hearing, constituted by the way some words are emphasized and others elided; the way a visual phenomenon, the printed page, is transposed into an aural phenomenon, a narrative voice; the way certain overtones are taken as significant overtones, certain echoes as significant echoes.¹³

The centrality of the ear for literature is an anomaly against the “centrality of the eye in Western culture” (Jenks). Martin Jay speaks of the “scopic regimes of modernity;” which, arising with the Italian Renaissance, when linear perspective became the dominant pictorial convention, inspired other modes of inquiry based on the reputedly detached, disembodied, dispassionate eye.¹⁴ The natural sciences, aided by the telescope and the microscope, were one such mode of inquiry.¹⁵ This visual bias became a pervasive bias in Western conceptions of knowledge. The entire world, Richard Rorty argues, has been reduced to “objects of quasi-observation” (50); the seen is now automatically equated with the known. And yet, as Jay recognizes, the scopic regimes of modernity are plural: not necessarily unified, stable, or dedicated to a foreseeable end.¹⁶ Indeed, the rise of mathematical formalism over empirical observation in cosmology and physics suggests that changes are brewing even in one of the historical strongholds of the eye (Boslough; Horgan).

The twentieth century may be a century of “regressive listening;” a time in which the ear has been forcibly “arrested at the infantile stage;” as Theodor Adorno charges (42, 41), but literature remains to exercise that retarded organ. It is hard to imagine what human beings would be without this aural instruction.¹⁷ And now more than ever, literature seems necessary to the varieties of intellectual discourse, the varieties of cognitive life. I thus defend it, not as a timeless entity but as a class of objects that fail to shut up, fail to restrict their resonance over time.

In *Literary Interest*, Stephen Knapp also finds himself “defending the notion of the ‘literary;’” to his surprise (2). As he sees it, literature is unique because of the special kind of interest it provokes, which comes about through “authorial failure” (23). A text will always “fail to have the content, and therefore fail even to have the form, that its author intended it to have,” because it can continue to signify only by allowing its words to be plucked out and inserted into “new composite networks of association” (27, 138). With each “new composite scenario” comes a new “emotive value” (86). As a result, the “inferential and associative relations” of any text always exceed anything imagined by the author (86). Endlessly changing, the text endlessly perpetrates its “structure of literary interest” (139).

Knapp’s concept of interest is close to what I call resonance. For Knapp, however, literary interest is not exactly a good thing, since it lures the reader into a “pathological” bond, a “mimetic contagion” that amounts to “literary parasitism” (61, 58, 87). This is a severe charge. But, as Knapp’s frequent invocation of Plato makes clear, this is not the first time such a charge has been leveled. Indeed, Plato’s severity toward poets (especially Homer) animates book 3 of *The Republic* and unfurls with a vengeance in book 10.¹⁸ For Plato, the danger of poetry is linked specifically to its aural effect: “Rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten” (105). Wary of that prehensile power, he classifies good and bad poetry according to the sound each produces. The good poet “keep[s] within a single harmony” and “make[s] use of nearly the same rhythm;” whereas the bad poet produces a jumble of resonances:

He will attempt to represent the roll of thunder, the noise of wind and hail, or the creaking of wheels, and pulleys, and the various sounds of flutes; pipes, trumpets, and all sorts of instruments: he will bark like a dog, bleat like a sheep, or crow like a cock.

(98; 3.397)

Writing a prose that reminded Longinus of a “noiseless stream” (79; 13.1), Plato has only contempt for the sonic excesses of poetry. Against such noise, he recommends the silent regime of the natural sciences, the “arts of measuring and numbering and

weighing.”¹⁹ They represent the “calculating and rational principle in the soul” and can “come to the rescue of the human understanding” (372; 10.602). But that calculating and rational principle does not always prevail, for poetry beguiles, and “he who listens to her” will succumb and become a relativist, caving in to that “irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small” (376; 10.605). And so poetry must be “banished” and the poet told “that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist” (101, 99; 3.398).

The Republic is fueled by the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (378; 10.607), which Eric Havelock ties to a profound shift in Greek philosophy. When Greek philosophers stopped seeing themselves as “oral thinkers, prophets of the concrete linked by habit to the past,” they turned to the written word for “a syntax suitable to abstract statement” (x).²⁰ But if the Platonic attack on poetry originated at a time when increasingly “the eye supplanted the ear as the chief organ” of philosophical thought (vii), the attack recurred throughout the Middle Ages²¹ and, more subtly, in Kant’s idealization of the aesthetic as a judgment of “subjective universal validity,” a personal satisfaction that is also automatically “the agreement of everyone” (48–51). In this Kantian sense, Plato too might be said to be unduly idealizing poetry, attributing to it (or to literature, its successor) the irresistible power to captivate its listeners.²² Even if poetry commanded that power in an oral culture, it certainly did not in the centuries that followed. Many texts fall on ears that are indifferent, ill-disposed, rigorously critical.

Against Plato’s absolute (if negative) idealization, I want to emphasize the text’s failure to dictate or even to presume on the terms of agreement, especially among readers far removed from its moment of genesis. If semantic estrangement is indeed the temporal fate of literature, every text eventually runs into a rude hearing that constitutes a diachronic insult. The literary, it seems, comes into being not only through the implied reader (see Iser) but also through the reader not implied, not welcome. This includes both the reader who turns a deaf ear to a particular tone of voice and the one with ears newly

and differently sensitized, who now hears nuances the author did not. In this sense, resonance is inseparable from dissonance, from the outbursts of sound produced when the reader clashes with the author, when their semantic universes fail to coincide.²³

This temporal disagreement between reader and author is noted by Longinus, perhaps the first critic to link resonance to an interactive process that, in its exuberance, can give rise to a democratic contest between the recipient and the originator. Celebrating the sublimity of literature, Longinus praises its aural longevity, understood as the persistence of sound not originating in texts but vibrating in response to them. “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul,” Longinus writes (61; 9.2).²⁴ The “truly sublime” will always “survive a first hearing” and have a temporal trajectory “which is strong and hard to efface” (57; 7.3). This enduring resonance is a function of the listening ear, which, moved by the sublime text, is moved to take “a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard” (55; 7.2).²⁵ Longinus does not say what happens when the reader flies in the face of the text or when the ear, acting “as though it had itself produced what it has heard,” imputes to the text meanings unimaginable to the author. Nevertheless, in foregrounding the agency of hearing and predicating it on the potential disagreement between author and reader, the Longinian theory of the sublime seems to honor literature less for its originary act than for subsequent acts of inflection, inversion, dissension.²⁶ Not ignorant of the “fettered liberty” of the slave (157; 44.4),²⁷ Longinus seems to make listening and not listening strangely cognate, indeed conflatable. The ear is not a passive receptacle; it is a force that re-makes what it hears. The aesthetics associated with Longinus, Frances Ferguson notes, “culminates in a dissolution of the subject in the person of the author and in a reinscription of the subject in the person of the reader.” The text “yield[s] the words to the hearer” (297, 292).

I want to emphasize the extent to which the text, as a diachronic object, yields its words differently across time, authorizing contrary readings across the ages and encouraging a kind of semantic democracy. A time traveler whose receding and incipient nuances fall on readers at various tangents and

speeds, the text sustains a continuum of disagreement. Across time, its very words become unfixed, unmoored, and thus democratically claimable. This democracy issuing from a resonant universe can be highlighted by two sharply divergent readings of Melville's *Billy Budd*, a text known for exercising its readers' ears in contrary ways.²⁸ Interpreting the story in 1971, Howard Vincent hears a significant opposition in the names of the key characters:

"Claggart" is a clanging and grinding sound; its gutturals snarl and cough in contrast to "Billy Budd," where the labial *b*'s suggest a caress and a kiss. "Claggart" has its flat first syllable, its grating second; "Billy Budd" has a pleasant lilt with its dancing dactyl followed by the sharp yet clean monosyllable of the last name. "Claggart" has ugly associations in its echoes: *braggart, haggard, ragged, staggered, laggard, slacker, lack, clog, clang, clangor, anger, angered, girt, guard, grr, ger* (Indo-European, "to cry," and a root in words like *crow* and *crane*), and *grate*. There is the rural English word *claggen* meaning "to daub with mud," the Danish *Klagge*, "mud." (8)

With so many offending echoes ringing in his ears, Vincent finds that *Billy Budd* can yield only one verdict, for the "meanings implicit in the tonality of 'Claggart' cling to his person" (8).

However, this tonality is not the one Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick hears in 1990. What catches her ear is a relentless innuendo, a pulsating beat alternating on two registers, doubling on itself, and victimizing Claggart. For Sedgwick, this "cross-grained local layering of enunciation" culminates in the "double entendre in this book between the mutiny question and the homosexual question" (110, 109), which ultimately eliminates both problems. The insinuating voice of *Billy Budd* is the voice of "gay genocide," ushering in "life after the homosexual" (128, 127). Sedgwick's reading is perhaps most indebted to Pat Robertson. Paradoxically, it is the noise of Robertson's homophobia—"AIDS is God's way of weeding his garden" (qtd. in Sedgwick 129)—that changes the tonal texture of *Billy Budd*, thickening it and quickening it, giving it a new edge, a new undulation of emphasis, making it newly and rawly significant. To support her reading of gay genocide, Sedgwick cites a group of words—"mys-

terious," "exceptional," "peculiar," "obscure," "phenomenal," "notable," "secretive" (94)—words that, boosted by the noise of homophobia, now rise above the threshold of detectability to be heard as if for the first time.²⁹

The sharp differences in the patterns of sound heard by Vincent and Sedgwick dramatize the vibrant openness of a resonant universe, the arguability of its words, the debatability of its nuances. This semantic democracy, robust and vociferous, is the most eloquent tribute to literature, answering to its temporal extension and nonintegral survival. Picking up noise as it travels across time, a text also picks up controversy, annoying and inspiring more and more readers, sharpening more and more ears at its expense. Nothing matches the changefulness of this nonentity, its knack for vibrating on issues that matter. Moving continuously, yielding its words to any who read it, literature has been a crucial democratic institution, and so it will remain, in ways unsuspected.

Notes

I thank Roger Blandford (theoretical astrophysics, California Inst. of Tech.) and Sam Schweber (physics, Brandeis Univ.) for reading this essay.

¹The vitality of this subfield is suggested by the recent appearance of two journals (*Diachronica: International Journal of Historical Linguistics and Language Variation and Change*, launched in 1984 and 1989) and by the publication of at least six new books on "language change" since 1994 (Aitchison; Bauer; Keller; Labov; McMahon; Trask).

²The distinction between my approach and Paul Ricoeur's is that Ricoeur is concerned with the relation between narrativity and temporality, whereas I am concerned with the relation between temporal and semantic change.

³I refer to the last line of *Invisible Man*: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

⁴A good analogy for the phenomenon I describe here is Houston Baker's account of blues: "a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3).

⁵Bloom's idiom is clearly Darwinian. And yet for evolutionary biologists today the unit of selection is at issue (Gould). Some argue that this unit is not the individual organism but the gene (Dawkins).

⁶While Bakhtin specifically discusses the novel (which he distinguishes from poetry), other critics have extended his notion of dialogism to poetry (Greene 99–115, esp. 101).

⁷Douglas, Wilkens, Pantazelou, and Moss; Maddox; Wiesenfeld and Moss; Moss and Wiesenfeld.

⁸Greenblatt acknowledges but also foreshortens Greene.

⁹The relativity of simultaneity was not exclusively Einstein's idea; for earlier contributions to it by Hendrick Antoon Lorentz and Henri Poincaré, see Pais 119–34. For current discussions of the subject, see Hawking 15–34; Thorne 59–86.

¹⁰This sense of incipience is even stronger in Richard Feynman's "path integral" interpretation of quantum electrodynamics, where the probability of a particle's going from one point to another derives, not from a single trajectory, but from the combined contribution of all possible trajectories. Feynman sees quantum electrodynamics as an attempt "to calculate the probability of an event that can happen in *alternative ways*" (59). For an excellent account of Feynman and space-time processes, see Schweber 373–473.

¹¹See Guillory's analysis of these changing institutional protocols and his argument in favor of an "aestheticism unbound" (340).

¹²I am aware of John Hollander's warning that the eye and the ear are not easily separable, for poetry is "hearing and vision joined," working "midway in the mind between eye and ear" (8, 116). On the historical rivalry between the eye and the ear, see Mitchell.

¹³Reading is not less inflected for being silent. The cognitive scientist Steven Pinker emphasizes the "phonetic perception" that enables human beings to "hear" what they read (159). Semantic perception similarly exercises hearing.

¹⁴See Ivins; Panofsky. Bryson is especially critical of the disembodied eye, although his thesis should perhaps be qualified by Kubovy's. In film theory, Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is a classic critique of visuality.

¹⁵For the historical alliance between the natural sciences and the visual arts, see Edgerton (*Heritage and Renaissance Discovery*). Stafford presents a late-twentieth-century polemic denouncing "text-based culture" and advocating a new "art-science" visual alliance.

¹⁶Jay's emphasis on the disunity of such scopopic regimes usefully challenges Foucault's assumption of panoptical seamlessness.

¹⁷Rousseau (12–15) and Vico (150) link the origins of language to onomatopoeia. For Derrida, this notion exemplifies the Western "logocentrism" that privileges speech over writing. Of course, Derrida's thesis might be contested on grounds of history (see Havelock; Goody; and Ong on orality and literacy) and of practical criticism (see Hartman on "ear-fear"; Stewart on "phonemic reading").

¹⁸Elsewhere in Plato's work (for example, in the *Symposium*), the attack on poetry is not as pronounced. Of course, Plato's writings are highly interpretable and literary. See Alteri; Nussbaum 87–233.

¹⁹Koyré shows the importance of Plato's mathematizations to subsequent developments of science (16–43). For a qualifying view, emphasizing Plato's subordination of mathematics to dialectic, see Lloyd 333–51.

²⁰To some degree Havelock's hypothesis is contested by Goody, who argues that the development of philosophy would not have been possible without the rise of literacy that followed the invention of the alphabet. According to Goody, the alphabet was invented centuries before the decades that Havelock sees as the turning point of Greek philosophy.

²¹In Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the Lady Philosophy calls the Muses of poetry "whores," as well as "Sirens" (4–5).

²²In the *Phaedrus* Plato is much more alert to the vicissitudes of the written word: "When they [words] have been once written down they are tossed about anywhere among those who do and among those who do not understand them. And they have no reticences or proprieties towards different classes of persons . . . for they can not protect or defend themselves" (88).

²³My emphasis on temporal disagreement is meant to challenge Habermas's postulate of consensual rational norms derivable from communicative action. Underwritten by a "principle of universalization," such consensual norms "deserve recognition by all concerned" (65).

²⁴ἄφροσ μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα (60; 9.2).

²⁵The last phrase is a translation of ὡς αὐτῆ γεννήσασα ὅπερ ἦκουσεν (54; 7.2).

²⁶Hertz (14) and Fry (138–47) see Longinian readings as exercises in discontinuity.

²⁷For Longinus's observations on liberty, democracy, and slavery, see the concluding chapter, 44, of *On the Sublime*.

²⁸For a history of the opposing readings, see Johnson.

²⁹The words of *Billy Budd* have always seemed sexually charged for some ears. Discussing the story in 1950, W. H. Auden says Claggart's predicament is that if "expressed sexually, the magic act must necessarily be homosexual, for the wish is for identity in innocence or guilt, and identity demands the same sex" (149).

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