

REVIEW

SOUND EFFECTS

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- Reuven Tsur. *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992. xi + 174 pages. \$32. 50.
- Burton Raffel. *From Stress to Stress: An Autobiography of English Prosody*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1992. xxi + 185 pages. \$27. 50.

The poet Louis Zukofsky once formulated his poetics as “An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music” (*A* [U of California P, 1978] 138). Zukofsky’s formulation suggests a set of problems for poetry readers. How do we find the area under poetry’s curve? How, for instance, do we integrate the meaning of speech with the music of verse? How, to speak in terms of disciplines, do we integrate linguistic research into poetry criticism? And how, historically speaking, do we derive prosodic theory from poetic practice? Two accomplished readers and professors of poetry, Burton Raffel and Reuven Tsur, perform their integrations using widely different methods. While both authors have something to teach us about hearing and reading poetry, both have chosen presentations that hinder, in different ways and to differing degrees, the usefulness and even the readability of their work.

Burton Raffel, who is perhaps best known as a poetry editor and translator, offers his book as a refreshing departure from prosodic theory, which he claims rides roughshod over actual poems. It is indeed refreshing to see a prosodist lengthen his field of study from Old English to contemporary poems, which may be non-metrical but are nevertheless musical. His reticence to interfere with the prosody poets themselves create is signaled by his subtitle, *An Autobiography of English Prosody*. As Raffel argues, “What poets in fact *do* is what the prosody of

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poetry written in English in fact *is*" (xi). Raffel appears to offer us just such an autobiography—an annotated anthology of the actual prosodic theories and practices of English and American poets. But his practical arrangement is marred by his own overriding theoretical presuppositions, which in fact keep the poets from presenting their own evidence.

The greatest obstacle to reading *From Stress to Stress* lies in Raffel's choice of prosodic notation; "to heighten readability, reduce typographical complexity, and lower printing costs" (xxi), stressed syllables are represented by capital and unstressed by lowercase letters. It may seem that his choice is both well-considered and insignificant. But in fact Raffel's idiosyncratic method renders poems practically unreadable. Here is one of Emily Dickinson's stanzas from Thomas H. Johnson's edition of her *Complete Poems* (Little, Brown 1960):

Some things that fly there be—
Birds—Hours—the Bumblebee—
Of these no Elegy. (45: #89)

Here is how it appears in *From Stress to Stress*:

some THINGS/ that FLY/ there BE—/
BIRDS—hours—/ the BUM/bleBEE—/
of THESE/ no E/leGY./ (136)

Dickinson is the only poet I know of whose poems are still routinely sold in bowdlerized, butchered editions (most visibly, Robert N. Linscott's "first edition" for Anchor Doubleday). It is infuriating to see Dickinson's text (with her own rhythmic capitalizations and dashes) violated in this way. How "readable" would Dickinson find her poems in this condition?

Though Raffel claims to have no theory, his overriding theoretical commitment is everywhere evident. He doesn't believe in the spondee or the trochee, which survives only in the guise of a "reversed iamb" (11). He thus puts no stress on Dickinson's "Hours," for instance, even though with her punctuation and capitalization Dickinson did just that (it is nearly impossible, reading aloud, to pause on "Hours" without stressing it). For Raffel, syllables are either stressed or unstressed, either capitalized or not. He cannot account for syllables which for various reasons are somewhat but not fully stressed. None of the final syllables in Dickinson's stanza, for instance—"be," "Bumblebee," and "Elegy"—would receive much stress in ordinary English, but all are raised in emphasis partly because they coincide with an iambic stress and partly because they rhyme. Maintaining that "rhyme is of no great prosodic significance" (xv) and arguing that "scansion is thus a foot-by-foot affair" (xviii), Raffel essentially rules out prosodic expectation. His theoretically streamlined prosody results in some surprisingly counter-intuitive scansions. Thus Sidney recalls, "i SOUGHT/ fit WORDS" (no

contrastive stress on “fit”; in Raffel’s repunctuated texts, Elizabethans write “i” like cummings), Shakespeare sees “bare RU/in’d QUIERS,” and Dylan Thomas lilt (a bit like Ross Perot), “NOW/ as I/ was YOUNG/ and EA/sy UN/der the AP/ple BOUGHS.”

Raffel wisely points out that “Prosody is hardly the beginning and ending of poetics” (xix), but his evaluations often result from just such an identification. John Skelton, we learn, “(a) has no particular grip on the Chaucerian Compromise [a stress-oriented pentameter] and (b) works fairly clearly in the shadow of the primal Old English metric” (23). That is, the pentameter, like the iamb, is the golden rule, which all Renaissance poets must have strived to achieve. The possibility that Skelton diverged from both the pentameter and the alliterative stress meter to forge his own, still influential rapid meter is not raised. Other condescending evaluations of poets (Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Moore, among the Americans) as prosodists in this “autobiography” will anger many readers.

Unlike most prosodists, poets have scales of musical measurement other than the stressed syllable. Raffel offers a credible scansion of William Carlos Williams’s famous poem, “so MUCH dePENDS / upON / a RED WHEEL / BARrow” (171), but neglects to point out that Williams is composing here not only by the syllable but the word (three words in the first line and one in the second of each unrhymed couplet). So too Dickinson often measures her poems into dashed and capitalized words and phrases (as in the stanza cited above). Other poets, such as Christopher Smart, Walt Whitman, and Allen Ginsberg, use the line itself as a musical measure, and Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and John Ashbery use the sentence as a counter-rhythm to the line. One memorable statement of poetics in Raffel’s book comes from Whitman: “People get accustomed to a certain order of traditions, forms: they think these a part of nature, or nature itself—that they are never to be displaced, are eternal: they will not be easily shaken out of their conviction even when they know all their vitality has departed. . . . There are times when the house cannot be patched any more but *asks to be taken down*” (131–32; Whitman’s italics). Perhaps prosodists ought not to prop up the syllable so exclusively that they miss other lengths of measurement, long ago reached by poets.

The loss of readability in the case of Tsur’s book is especially lamentable, for Tsur, the head of the Cognitive Poetics Project at Tel Aviv University, is at once a subtle and powerful thinker whose attempts to bridge the gaping divides between sound, sense, and feeling are original and important. Unfortunately, readers not thoroughly familiar with linguistics—with phonetics and phonology in particular—will find much of *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive* nearly impossible to decipher. Perhaps anyone serious about reading poetry should acquire a basic knowledge of linguistics. But Tsur might also have kept poetry readers who are not professional linguists more in mind.

Though Tsur claims, in the preface to his “present edition” (it is impossible to determine when the book first appeared), that he “intend[s] this work” not only for “speech researchers on whose work I have liberally drawn” but also for “literary theoreticians and critics, with whom I share so many of the problems to be solved” (viii), it is in fact unclear how far the latter group (not to mention poets and non-academic poetry readers) figure in his considerations. At times, Tsur’s formulations assume a mathematical compactness: “In the section relevant to us, [Cooper and Ross] describe the sequence of vowels in a freeze (frozen conjunct) as a subsequence of the sequence of vowels that roughly corresponds to the vowels in figure 2 of chapter 1, with reference to F_2 ” (85; neither “freeze” nor “figure 2,” which appears seventy-five pages earlier, is clearly explained). At other times, Tsur strays from ordinary English: “First and foremost, we should mention a highly divergated overtone structure” (105). Though his book is published in the United States, Tsur makes little attempt to adapt his insights for English readers. He writes, for instance, of the apparent ugliness of “affricates” (64) without either defining the term or providing an English example (/ch/; I will use the standard linguistic notation for phonemes), and he discusses the emotional resonance of “nasal vowels” (66–81) at length without mentioning that there are no nasal vowels in English.

Much of the usefulness of Tsur’s work, beyond his own particular analyses and illustrations, depends upon the results of research, but he is oddly lax about producing them. In his second chapter, for instance, Tsur adapts Jakobson’s suggestive thesis that the phonemes children acquire last for referential speech are especially charged with emotion. To the extent that we are persuaded by Jakobson’s studies and Tsur’s adaptations, we would find a list of these “late acquisitions” (53) valuable for our own reading. But aside from a few examples, Tsur fails to provide such a list. By simply providing a glossary and table of linguistic features important for his study (encoded, periodic, continuous, compact, lately acquired, nasal, rounded, chromatic, affricate, richly precategory, and so on), Tsur would have greatly increased the value of his work for poetry readers.

Even though Tsur’s language is, to use his terminology, “highly encoded,” his book is worth our efforts. Many readers will find his insights surprising and his methods intriguing in their own right. The book is composed of five loosely connected essays. The first, and most difficult, chapter concerns what Tsur calls the “poetic mode of speech perception” (1). We hear language differently than we do music or noise, and apparently process it in a different (left) hemisphere of the brain. Tsur speculates that in the poetic mode of hearing language, whether in a poem or not, some preconscious acoustic information (for example, the overtones of speech sounds) seeps into our linguistic coding, resulting in mysterious impressions (we think some sounds are “brassy” and others dull, for in-

stance, or we feel that /u/ is somehow darker than /i/). One of the virtues of Tsur's method is that he takes these impressions seriously, and tries to account for them. In his second chapter, Tsur applies Jakobson's theory of late acquisitions to French Symbolist poetry. In his third chapter he uses cognitive theories of spatial orientation to explore such basic impressions as the one that /i/ is higher and thinner than /u/. Here he draws a fascinating conclusion about synesthesia. Since "higher sensory domains borrow terms from the lower sensory domains more frequently than the other way around," we speak synesthetically (of "sweet sounds," for example) "whenever we need to characterize some lowly differentiated perceptual or emotional quality" (107). In his fourth chapter, perhaps the place for poetry critics to begin, Tsur analyses the sonic structure of Arthur Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelles" in great detail, attempting to explain and justify the poet's mysterious symbolism. And in his final chapter, fascinating but perhaps least useful for those outside the field of speech research, Tsur compares his approach to expressive sounds with that of the psycholinguist Iván Fónagy, who writes, for instance, of phallic apical /r/ sounds and anal-aggressive glottal stops. It is of course easy to ridicule Fónagy's identification of the tongue with the phallus and the glottal sphincter muscle with the anus, but it is nevertheless interesting to consider the possibility that some of the body language of speech formation feeds into our sense of sound.

Tsur's analyses raise important methodological questions. How useful are the results and methods of cognitive poetics to the theory and practice of reading (and writing) poetry? Can we, for instance, adapt Tsur's techniques and findings for our own interpretative purposes without becoming cognitive poetics ourselves? Are the procedures of cognitive poetics consistent with, or simply superior to, those of poetry criticism and theory? To take up the problem less sympathetically, does cognitive poetics do more than restate the "impressions" of traditional poetry criticism? Or are its results too "precatogorical" to make any difference? I will try to answer at least some of these questions by isolating some distinctive features of Tsur's methodology.

Toward the end of his book, Tsur (finally) codifies what he calls the "procedure of Cognitive Poetics" as it applies to the expressiveness of sound patterns. First one considers the "perceived effects of sounds," whether conscious or subconscious, and "attempts to account for these effects by isolating certain perceptual features of the sound stimulus [the sound itself] or the articulatory gestures that produced them" (156). Next one tries to "determine the sound's (sometimes conflicting) combinational potential," and finally one points out "possible combinations of the sound with other (semantic and thematic) aspects of the poem" (157). Several features of Tsur's method are theoretically attractive. Tsur avoids any extra-textual, total identification of particular sounds with specific emotions and feelings. As he demonstrates, speech sounds are complex phenom-

ena composed of often contradictory features, some of which will be heightened or exploited in particular situations: “Thus, the sibilants /s/ [as in “his”] and /ʃ/ [as in “husb”] may have a *bushing* quality in one context and a *harsh* quality to varying degrees in some others” (2). Tsur is a structuralist in that he compares bipolar relations rather than terms. His poles (light-dark, musical-harsh, high-low) are continuous fields; any one sound might contain some of each contradictory quality. Cognitive poetics isolates tendencies and potentials, not essences.

But readers may find Tsur’s confidence in his scientific method somewhat naïve. His technical, unrhetorical, and closely reasoned style (and his enviable dependence on the studies of other speech researchers) gives his work an aura of unassailable authority. Rather than claim absolutely objective or universal validity, Tsur usually argues that “there is considerable intersubjective and intercultural agreement” (89) in his hypotheses or results. He also appeals over the heads of traditional poetry critics to experimental verification. At one point, he cites with approval Kenneth Burke’s observation that similar phonemic combinations, as in Coleridge’s phrase “But *silently*, by *slow* degrees,” may reinforce each other, but cautions that the difference between “very similar, moderately similar, and dissimilar . . . can be settled only by extensive empirical testing” (40). One hopes that poets do not wait until the results are in.

Demanding intersubjective, intercultural results, cognitive poetics requires metaphorical, relatively absolute identifications rather than metonymical, culturally and historically “mediated associations” (90). Like most linguists, Tsur is interested in universal rather than local truths (or tendencies and potentials). Thus, after arguing for the relative darkness and “obscurity” of /u/ and the brightness and “clarity” of /i/, Tsur speculates that “relatively low differentiation [of component phonemic frequencies] and relative darkness are similar phenomenally to a sufficient degree to warrant matching the back vowel extreme [u/] of the vowel continuum with the dark extreme of the brightness continuum” (23–24). Tsur’s speculations confirm our own impressions and account for the prevalence of /u/ (“gloomy”) sounds in poems concerning obscure phenomena. Yet this metaphorical identification obscures at least one perceptual difference: we can imagine objects now in darkness, whereas those of us without access to acoustic laboratories have not consciously, distinctly heard the “formant” frequencies that go into speech sounds. I find Tsur’s results very suggestive, but I can neither verify them myself nor rule out other metaphorical identifications. Moreover, I also find it important to know what culturally contingent associations influence our equations since poems are themselves cultural artifacts.

Tsur’s cognitive poetics is a linguistically informed reception theory in which the poet is replaced by the poem, and the poem is described as a collection of readers’ specific and universal responses. Taking a cue from Wimsatt, Tsur judges interpretations which consider where a poem originates guilty of the “genetic

fallacy" (116). He finds Chadwick's compositional explanations of Rimbaud's colored vowels suggestive but "ad hoc," noting that the critic is "still concerned with the poet's intention rather than with the poem as an aesthetic object" (118). For a poem to be a significant aesthetic object, a number of readers must have read (and preferably criticized) it. Though he discusses a wide range of poems—English, American, French, Hebrew, Hungarian—Tsur tends to be conservative and canonical in his choices, devaluing poets and poetic behavior outside the intercultural laws of reception. Thus in his discussion of synesthetic figures Tsur claims that Wilde's colored sounds are "regarded as the extravagances of a highly idiosyncratic author" (106) and notes that Donne's "loud perfume" has been "condemned by critics as 'the concoction of an experience'" (106). Are concocted experiences less poetic than real ones? The unruly extravagances of poetry may speak to, or encourage, our own. In my opinion, it's OK to wear a loud perfume with loud colors.

It is interesting that Tsur lets the critical majority (here unnamed) evaluate for him. Elsewhere, he evaluates more explicitly according to his own implicit aesthetics. For Tsur, the poem is a verbal icon of reconciled, analogized oppositions. An integral description of a poem's sonic patterning demonstrates its universal value. Tsur argues that when we read Rimbaud's "Voyelles," "certain factors urge us to bind together all these discordant elements *in spite of their incompatibility*. So far as the urge is derived from vogue or extravagance, a poem cannot be said to have aesthetic integrity. The greater the part that multiple relationship plays in perceiving the poem as a whole, the greater the literary excellence—independent of fashion—that can be attributed to it" (121). If Rimbaud's sonnet is sonically and imagistically responsive, it is not only notorious but good. We might, on the other hand, conclude that readers have, for whatever personal or fashionable reasons, taken to "Voyelles." We might skeptically argue (like the former reception theorist Stanley Fish) that influential critics, anthologies, and inflexible university curricula have "programmed" our receptivity. Yet if it cannot reveal universal poetic value, Tsur's "reception theory" at least avoids the subjectivism of its predecessors. Tsur demonstrates, if not "on the contrary" at least on the other end of the continuum, that widely shared correspondences of sound and expression may create unexpected poetic pleasures. Poets have more than one correct response to make, but many more wrong than right ones.

For Tsur as for Pope, the "sound must seem an echo to the sense." In addition, Tsur's poem must echo the reader's sonic sense. Though he counts among his "major assumptions" the claim that "poetic effects arise from a disruption of the smooth functioning of cognitive processes" (155), Tsur irons out disruption into reinforcement. A good poem will disrupt or delay our reading processes, but will finally answer our sonic and expressive demands. In an intriguing experiment, Tsur creates a "noisy" equivalent to Shakespeare's line "When to

the sessions of sweet silent thought”: “When to the quorum of kind, quiet thought,” and concludes that in his version, the sound “becomes either neutral or improper to the emotion expressed” (31). But is Tsur’s line, while it may not equal Shakespeare’s, less good simply because it is less “silent”? There is no reason why poets can’t employ sounds which run counter to sense. Tsur discusses at length a conspicuously onomatopoeitic repetition in a line from FitzGerald’s *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*: “Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!” Most literary critics and readers would note that “rumble” and “Drum” echo each other (though neither “assonance” or “consonance” fully describes this reverberation). Tsur notes that the “rich, precatagorical auditory information [of “rumble” and “Drum”] appears to reinforce one another [sic] (these speculations have been supported by authorities in speech research)” (37). But Tsur himself forgets FitzGerald’s command *not* to “heed the rumble of the distant Drum!” FitzGerald’s line thus echoes the opposite of its sense. Does this mean that FitzGerald must be witty or ironic, or that we should value his line less highly? Cognitive poetics has difficulty hearing and explaining counter-expressive sounds.

Can poetic sense seem, or even be, an echo to its sound? Tsur usefully distinguishes between convergent and divergent sound patterns in poems, in which “repeated sound clusters converge with the stress pattern of words as well as with the poem’s metric patterns. . . . Divergent sound patterns, in contrast, form interwoven threads . . . and are diffused in an unpredictable order” (57). Tsur correlates convergent sound patterns with witty, playful poems and divergent patterns with vague, mysterious ones. As an instance of the latter Tsur analyses the diffuse sonic patterning of Paul Verlaine’s ineffable poem, “Chanson d’Automne,” the first stanza of which follows:

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l’automne
Blessent mon coeur
D’une langueur
Monotone.

Tsur points out, among other things, that “all the rhymes of the first two stanzas are based on ‘beautiful’ [late, periodic, continuous] sounds, either nasal vowels, or the sound sequence *-eur*” (68). And as Tsur notes, Verlaine’s lineation obscures and diffuses the patterning. Yet Tsur overlooks one convergent pattern, which has to do with Verlaine’s oddly appropriate choice of the heart-piercing violins. We may of course imagine a harsh wind blowing through the trees. But we may also attend to the constructive patterning of Verlaine’s stanza and hear “violons” echoing a more expected word, “violence,” which may have suggested the wound,

and even the “sang” (“blood”) resonating in “sanglot.” Such a convergent phenomenon, not restricted to symbolist poems, is difficult to characterize. The echoing, palpable “violence” may have influenced Verlaine’s choice of “violons” without his knowing it, and thus have little to do with punning. Even when homophonic revision can be documented, witty intention cannot be assumed. Noting Keats’s revision of a line in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” from “O what can ail thee, Knight at arms” to “Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,” Tsur concludes that “the substitution of *Ab* for *O* may serve to heighten poetic diction” (152). But he says nothing about the obvious sonic transformation of “Knight” to “wight.” Perhaps another dimension of the poetic mode of speech perception is that poets let some of this rich pre-poetic material seep into their lyric reformations.

Once they make the effort, Tsur’s readers will find that the cognitive poetic method has changed the way they read poetry. They may analyze expressive sound patterns in poems with a new confidence that their impressions are not simply impressionistic; they may describe these patterns with more precision; and they may distinguish previously unknown strands in these patterns, such as late acquisitions. While I think Tsur’s new critical poetics limits our own receptivity to his approach, the originality of his work, like that of the new critics, resonates.