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Hearing Voices: Reading as Listening in Literature, Law, and Theology

by James Boyd White*

Jack Sammons has always written from the center. Whether he is writing about teaching, or the legal profession, or law, or religion, or music, or baseball, or manners, everything he says comes from the same mysterious and powerful place: coherent, honest, generous, and sincere, not at all aggressive, but insistent upon the value and importance of the inquiry at hand. Jack writes as the whole person he is, with a constant and deep integrity.

As we all know, an important part of what Jack has written about is the world of sound and music, to which he is richly alive. I think especially of *The Law's Melody*,¹ in which he builds a whole ontology, and ethics too, on a musical base. For him, the analogy between law and music leads to a vision of meaning emerging out of mystery, a process in which we can participate but which we cannot control, and thus one that constantly calls upon us to live out of the great theological virtues of hope and faith.

One of my debts to Jack's work is that I have myself become much more aware of the world of sound, in contrast to the world of sight. Here I want to build on what I have learned from Jack over the years. My remarks are meant as a sort of meditation on sound and hearing in connection with three fields that are of importance to us both: literature, law, and theology.

In particular I want to focus on what I will be calling the voice, especially on the way we hear voices when we read. My idea, perhaps

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1. Jack L. Sammons, *The Law's Melody*, 55 VILL. L. REV. 1143 (2010).

a paradoxical one, is that the activity of reading—which looks like the exercise of sight alone, taking place in silence—is also a form of hearing, especially the hearing of voices.

I mean this in honor of Jack, without whose example I would never have written this paper.

I. LITERATURE

I want to start with literature, especially poetry. How can reading be a form of hearing? Robert Frost had this to say in a letter to a friend:

The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.²

We all know something about what Frost means, for we are all, sometimes at least, eye-readers. Maybe most lawyers and professors are eye-readers almost all the time, skimming for information, for an argument, for a conclusion. When I was young, a huge fad was made of what was called “speed reading,” which is really a kind of deliberate skimming.

You cannot speed read poetry, because even though it is usually written down, its essence is not in sight, but in sound. In a lovely essay about his education as a literary critic, William Pritchard says that it took the form of a kind of ear-training.³ The basic shape of a poem is not of images, but sounds. You cannot diagram it.

Part of the sound is that of meter and rhyme, of assonance and consonance, and the complex music these things create. Much can be said on these matters, but today I want to focus on something else, the fact that poetry is partly made of voices, and that we need to hear them accurately. If a poem has value it lives, and its life comes in large part from its voices. I want to focus on the work of Robert Frost, whose poetry was self-consciously made of voices.

Early in his work, Frost became aware that the idea of poetry he was trying to realize consists at its heart of a life-giving tension between two systems of sound: its regular meter (and sometimes rhyme) and the cadence of the sentences—of the voices—of which it was also composed.

By his term “sentence sound,” Frost meant the way the sentence would be sounded in ordinary speech, a fact of language to which he believed

2. Robert Frost, *Letter to John Bartlett*, in *THE LETTERS OF ROBERT FROST* 176 (Donald Sheehy, Mark Richardson & Robert Faggan eds., 2014).

3. William H. Pritchard, *Ear-Training*, in *PLAYING IT BY EAR* 3-18 (1994).

all of us were sensitive whether we knew it or not. He called it the sound of sense.

Here are a few very short expressions, taken from examples in Frost's letters, which I think we would all know how to say. I will try to read them in a way that reflects their cadence. While I do it, ask yourself whether I am right, and how you know.

You mean to tell me you can't read?
I said no such thing.
Well read then.
You're not my teacher.⁴

Or:

My father used to say—
You're a liar!
If a hen and a half lay an egg and a half etc.
A long long time ago— . . .
Come, child, come home.
The thing for me to do is to get right out of here while I am able.
No fool like an old fool.⁵

In Frost's poems, we can hear the cadences of the sentences running against the regular beat of the meter. Take these lines, known to us all; if I read them simply as meter and rhyme it would sound like this: "De dah de dah de dah de dah."

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.⁶

But if I read them with a sense of the cadence of the sentences, I think you can hear the two registers of sound Frost means—the sentence and the meter—working with and against each other to make music of a new kind.

When this happens—as we hear the voice of the sentence, as we hear the countering voice of the meter and rhyme—I think we hear something else as well, the voice of the poet himself, the one who is engaged in this serious play with sound and music.

4. Frost, *supra* note 2, at 122 (emphasis omitted).

5. *Id.* at 175-76.

6. Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, in *THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST* 224 (Lathem ed., 1923).

Maybe poetry works by the ear, you say, but how about the novel—say, a novel by Jane Austen? We have all seen movies and TV shows based on novels, but none of them seem to work. Why not?

I think it is because these shows try to represent in a dominantly visual medium a book that lives not in the eye but in the ear. When we watch them, we are swamped with irrelevant visual stimulation, from pictures of lovely English fields to costumes supposed to be authentic to interiors that look as though they came from *Country Life* to the faces and figures of particular people, whom we are supposed to imagine say as Elizabeth and Darcy or Emma and Mr. Knightly.

One of our deepest instincts as human beings is to try to read a person's character in his or her face, in their way of standing or moving, and when we have before us the faces and persons of the actors, we are profoundly distracted from the words they say. Under such circumstances one can hardly hear the dialogue. The crucial voice of the narrator, created by the music of these other voices, is occluded altogether.

If you think of something like the famous beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*,⁷ you can see that voice can be crucial in the novel as well as in poetry. As you may remember, this chapter consists almost exclusively of a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, one that exemplifies the truth of the famous opening sentences:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?”

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“Do you not want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris

7. JANE AUSTEN, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* (TARK Classic Fiction ed. 2008) (1813).

immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

"I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley may like you the best of the party."

"My dear, you flatter me. I certainly *have* had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty."

"In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of."⁸

* * *

As you think about your response to this passage, do you want to say that you *see* what Austen is doing? Or that you *hear* what she is doing? It has to be the latter, I think; there is nothing present to us but the voices, nothing at all.

What their voices reveal is who the people are and what relationship exists between them. These are the most important things of all to Austen, not only ethically, but practically. Judgment about voice in this sense is especially necessary in a highly formal world where people are often pretending to be what they are not. A mistake in judgment—if Lizzie chose Wickham rather than Darcy, for example—could be a total lifelong disaster. Indeed, one value of the novel for us as readers is that it can train our capacity to hear voices and what they mean.

In this passage we hear not only the voices of the Bennets, but in another way, behind them, the voice of the author. We know who Austen is as she speaks to us, creating this play among voices. She is not to be seen, but that does not mean she is not there. She is a

8. *Id.* at 3-4.

presence in our hearts, in our minds—really, in this very room, today. Her voice lives across time.

II. LAW

Voice is important in law, too. Take, for example, the essential form we call the legal hearing, the session in which one voice is poised against another, prosecution against defense, say, presenting competing versions of both the facts and of the law. At the end, another speaker decides the dispute, and, if it is a judge, explains himself or herself.

This hearing is all about hearing. The lawyers need to learn both to write and to speak, not to the eye-reader, but to the one who listens and hears. The task of the lawyer is to make his or her voice heard. No good lawyer wants the case to be decided on briefs alone without the chance to speak to the decider.

In this effort it is not enough merely to sound like a lawyer, as most of us tried to do when we started law school. We need to speak authentically, as ourselves and as lawyers at the same time, not just reciting arguments but meaning what we say and saying what we mean. We must find within us the capacity to speak in an authentic voice.

Again and again I have seen skilled and knowledgeable people fail to do this, and in doing so fail to get the real attention of their audience. We who have been trained as eye-readers and eye-writers, both in college and in law school, need to become ear-readers and ear-writers, and in this way to listen for the most important significances in what we and others say—significances that can not be reduced to propositions, or concepts, or schemes of thought. Both practically and ethically, it is crucial that we learn to speak and to write in our own real voices—crucial, that is, both for our professional success as lawyers and for the meaning of the life we are making. It is hard to do.

Suppose we are present at a hearing in which two lawyers are speaking as I have suggested they should speak, compellingly and authentically both as people and as lawyers, and in which the judge is listening and questioning well. We hear these three voices, we hear the voices of witnesses, we hear the voices of legal authorities—legislatures and courts—some of them perhaps from long ago, some of them much more recent, none of them perfect.

Do we also hear, behind or below these audible voices, another voice? Could we call this the voice of the law, creating this drama, this play, of human voices?

To think about hearing and speaking in the law can make us aware that as lawyers we are in the presence of a form of life, a source of life, that we cannot wholly understand—certainly not by “seeing” it—and a form of life that compels our respect and our deference. As Jack has

said, there is more at work in the law than we can know, and this “more” can become a ground for respecting what we cannot manage and control.

III. THEOLOGY

I want to now turn briefly to the relationship between “seeing” and “hearing” in theology.

There certainly exist wonderful religious paintings and buildings, but if we tried to do theology by sight, we would be doomed to failure. In the traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, at least, we certainly do not see God. Instead, we hear stories about his mighty acts, as in the great creation story in Genesis and in the salvation story in Exodus; we hear his prophets speak to Israel, demanding a change of life and threatening disaster; we hear the voice of the Psalmist addressing God in joy and devastation and danger and thanksgiving. In the New Testament we have stories about Jesus, about his ministry, his death, and his resurrection. We have the letters of Paul, struggling to build a church, and the Acts of the Apostles enriching that story.

All of this is a theology of hearing, not of sight. It is true that the disciples and others saw Jesus in the flesh. But we have not seen him, and in fact have no idea what he looked like; we were not present at any of the miracles, or the crucifixion; he has never looked us in the face, as he did with his disciples, urging us to join him.

The incarnate divine reality I speak of lives for us not so much in the realm of sight as in the realm of speech: in the words of the Gospels, of Paul’s letters, of Acts. As Paul says, “[F]aith cometh by hearing.”⁹ And Paul’s own mystical experience of the presence of Christ was mainly an experience of the voice of Jesus.

This is true of us, too, or at least of me. If I think of who Jesus is for me, I think mainly of his voice as he speaks to his disciples, to the crowds of people, sometimes to the Father, yet always to us as well. I do not imagine him visually. Our most direct route to him is through his voice. That is what is with us. His voice is immortal. It is no accident that he is called The Word.

Here is a question you may have seen coming: Is it true that as we hear the voice of the Creator in Genesis, the voice of Abraham remonstrating with God over the fate of Sodom, the voice of Moses reporting the laws that God has given him, the voice—or voices—of the Psalmist, the voice of Isaiah, the voice of Paul, the voice of the Evangelists, and the voice of Jesus himself, we hear another voice behind them—as we hear

9. *Romans* 10:17.

the voice of Frost, of Austen, of the law—but this time, the Voice of all voices?

So far I have said nothing about music, Jack's special love. But I want to close with a poem by George Herbert on the subject. Entitled *Church Musick*, this poem is built upon Herbert's love of music, which often led him to walk in the evening from his home in Bemerton to Salisbury, where he would join others in singing sacred music. Here is his expression of what this music meant to him:

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: when displeasure
 Did through my bodie wound my minde,
 You took me thence, and in your house of pleasure
 A daintie lodging me assign'd.

Now I in you without a bodie move,
 Rising and falling with your wings:
 We both together sweetly live and love,
 Yet say sometimes, God help poore Kings.

Comfort, I'll die; for if you poste from me,
 Sure I shall do so, and much more:
 But if I travell in your companie,
 You know the way to heavens doore.¹⁰

This is a song of gratitude and love, addressed to the music itself, which is seen as a person: a person who called him into her company, into her very self, where they can sweetly live and love. There is an obvious, if surprising, element of sexuality here, which should be recognized and honored as an image of love and life, as something holy. You can imagine Herbert singing, especially singing the polyphonic music of the time, rising and falling, and it is beautiful.

But I want to draw special attention to the close of the poem, which says that at the end, church music brings us to an opening, to a rising, to the edge of something we cannot understand but know is present, here imagined as heaven's door: "[I]f I travell in your companie, you know the way to heavens doore." This music brings us to the edge of an experience that will carry us beyond it, into a transcendent realm. It is the experience of hope itself.

* * *

10. George Herbert, *Church Musick*, in *THE TEMPLE* 73 (1633).

I have meant these remarks as a kind of meditation on Jack's insistence on the importance of the world of sound.

If I ask you now, not whether you see what I mean, but whether you have heard my voice, you may have felt a sense of how powerful and important the line between seeing and hearing is. For to put the question that way calls for a great deal more than conceptual comprehension, or the perception of a pattern of ideas. You will find yourself asking not about concepts, consistency, intelligence, and clarity, as we normally do, but about person, integrity, presence, imagination, and coherence. The question will not be whether you agree or disagree with this aspect of what I have said, but whether you have heard my voice. That will imply another question, inescapably, having to do with your own voice as you respond, as you speak to another or yourself: "What is your voice here, what life does it have, what does it offer the person who hears you?"

As Jack's own work so clearly shows, the voice can have a special kind of integrity. The voice comes from inside, and must be fit with other things that come from inside. It is what we trust. Voice is the way we are to each other, the way we connect inside to inside. It is by hearing that we know other people and connect to them.

Remember what I said at the beginning of the Article:

Jack . . . has always written from the center. Whether he is writing about teaching, or the legal profession, or law, or religion, or music, or baseball, or manners, everything he says comes from the same mysterious and powerful place: coherent, honest, generous, and sincere, not at all aggressive, but insistent upon the value and importance of the inquiry at hand. Jack writes as the whole person he is, with a constant and deep integrity.

How do we know these things? We do not see them. We hear them, in the reality of Jack's voice.
