

**TAYLOR BRADY: ACOUSTICS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY—LAURA ELRICK'S
"DIMENSIONS OF CALM"**

so much 'dimension' in a street. it was total. was it felt?

Readings of "Dimensions of Calm" fail with a particular and forceful clarity. Legibility – the tendential unity of the poem's total space – at every turn runs up against specific contradictions, determined resistances within what I've chosen to call the poem's voicings. What I'm aiming at in the application of this term, borrowed from music, to Elrick's writing is a sense of the reverberant space *between* voices. The problem of how to think this space is one of the central issues opened up for contemporary poetics by Elrick's text.

The poem is composed of what a more familiar approach might characterize as fragments of voice. Partial utterances leak from board rooms of the "oil barons" to bump up against the language of intimate sexual space and its gendered violences; the documentary lyricism of a poet's walk through the city gives onto a field of political slogans; and mediatised noun phrases—capitalized in both the orthographical and political-economic sense—butt heads with the communiqués of military geopolitics. These utterances are ultimately spatial: they carry with them the indices of their own particular locations within the circuit of capital, and serve to align the more heterogeneous space of the poem, in which the "resonant characteristics" of these various spaces set up patterns of mutual reinforcement and destructive interference, with an approach to the global horizon itself.

I'm tempted to characterize the poem's rapid movement from one socially situated utterance to another as a cinematic technique, akin to intercutting or montage. In cinema, of course, it's questionable whether such techniques, more than three-quarters of a century past their modernist heyday, retain any critical force. And to allow such techniques to fall back from film into literary aesthetics would seem on the face of it even more bankrupt (cf. Fredric Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* on the Victorian novel of what he calls "synchronous monadic simultaneities," and its genetic relation to cinematic montage). What Elrick's method achieves, however, is not simply a return to the outmoded Dickensian providential narrative that lurks behind cinematic modernity, but the nearly literal forward application of cinematic technique to a literary field unaccustomed to it. This return of simultaneity to writing by way of cinema forces the providential frame to recede radically.

In this sense, the postmodern doxa which asserts the primacy of discourse collage to formally innovative poetics has prepared a technique for Elrick, if not yet a method. The signal difference here—one's sense that "Dimensions of Calm" *does* develop a method decidedly critical of mere carnivalesque heterophony—lies in the fact that each of the quasi-utterances out of which the poem is made has its own claim on how best to structure the overall space in which we hear it: the voice of the "oil barons" resonates not only in the boardroom, but has as its project a total, global reverberation. Meanwhile, the outbursts of resistance in the poem, taking place immediately at the level of micropractices, cannot be adequately read against this limited horizon – their very juxtaposition with the language of capital poses the question of their ultimate spatial relation to the world system. Our received understanding of the poem as a discourse collage tends to neutralize these struggles, opting instead to prepare the various language-acts of the poem for inclusion in a formal meta-space which will settle *for them* the question of their mutual arrangement. Elrick's dissonant chorus of utterances and quasi-utterances, by contrast, approaches the thought of such a total space as the central *problem* of the poem.

One way to conceive of this method, absent the reference to voices¹—which might set some experimental-verse teeth on edge—involves attending to the way in which discourse-collage here approaches its readymades. Elrick's focus is at least as much on the *madness* of the poem's constituent materials as on their *readiness*. That is to say, the question one is always prompted to ask is one of production before it becomes one of appropriation or expropriation, e.g., 'Under what circumstances, in what space, can I imagine this act of language having been produced?' Here is where I locate the particular value of an acoustic reading of space in Elrick's writing, despite its obvious affinities with cinematic techniques. One is put in mind of Glenn Gould's fantasia, in his essay "The Prospects of Recording," of a symphony that, thanks to the close-miking techniques of modern sound reproduction, would be constructed of individual instruments playing in different places and at different times, each interacting with radically distinct room acoustics. The cognitive and aesthetic stakes of such a performance would depend in large part on the listener's ability to produce a space for hearing, reading back, as it were, from the individual sounds to their productive context, and then forward again to a "map" of the interactions between these different listening chambers.

By similar means, Elrick's poem approaches what is for Jameson the fundamental problematic of contemporary culture—the question how to map a set of global relations of domination and struggle that one knows to be present, but which operate at a level of scale so monstrous as to exceed representation²—by means of a kind of echolocation. One intuits a space which *must* allow the interarticulation of these various discursive positions, and their underlying positions in class struggle. In the lack of such a space ready to hand for representation, i.e., with the providential frame no longer given, or more importantly, finding itself at issue, the reader sets about the task of imagining how to produce a new kind of space. That this kind of space would have to be urban seems given, since nothing else would allow the dense proximity-effects through which these voices enter into such direct contact and contradiction. That it is emphatically *not* the space of our present global cities, whose murderous stratification, well-policed class boundaries, and imperial stance toward their international hinterlands militates against the kinds of contact their existence makes possible at a purely formal or potential level, seems equally evident. Thus, the poem announces, the task of reading must include a reading of the city—and the task of making the city thus legible would seem to entail as its necessary condition the more arduous task of first *remaking* the city. The limit of coherence for what I am calling the social acoustics of the poem is precisely the internal limit of current social constructions of space.

In this sense, the specific moment of articulation within the poem often turns out to be larger than the poem itself. Here the concept of an internal limit to coherence re-emerges as a problem of poetic form: the aesthetic object has for content the contradiction between artistic closure and social struggle, but is itself situated within the field produced in that contradiction. For "Dimensions of Calm," content is precisely that which cannot be contained. The problem posed by the writing's form is also a problem *for* form, and can only be addressed by modes of collective struggle that carry us far beyond "the poem itself." Here the radical failure of the poem, its constitutive lack of fit between form and content, in

1 Here I should note that my early attempts to place this work under the heading of the "vocal" were met, quite correctly, with some skepticism by Elrick herself during a conversation earlier this year. I hope that the context of my use of "voice" in this essay makes it clear that I do not mean simply a representation of unmediated natural speech. Rather, my sense of the term is closer to the Voloshinovian "utterance," that is, an act of language produced from a specific collective position in social space.

2 Elrick's work toward answering this question is of course quite different than that proposed by the films considered in Jameson's book, especially those "first-world" films which allegorize the world system by way of conspiracy narratives. Nonetheless, Jameson's brief discussion, in the context of Brian DePalma's *Blowout*, of the postmodern disarticulation of the sound track from the image track makes for suggestive reading here, opening the possibility that where conspiracy films struggle visually to produce a figure for that which is real but unrepresentable, this eruption of what Michel Chion calls the acousmatic voice figures such an "absent-but-operative" totality by producing a lack of figuration.

rendering its own dimensions perceptible becomes the ground of the very cultural and political work onto whose horizon it opens.

This is nowhere so clear as in the fifth and final section, in which the outward markers of collage and heterophony – different spatial dispositions of lines on a single page, shifts from verse to prose, variable margins, etc. – have vanished in favor of a relatively stable, irregular lyric stanza that marks the poem's nearest approach to the “voice of poetry” as something unitary and coherent. Perhaps paradoxically, it is here that the reader finds a fundamental contradiction structuring the unitary “voice” itself. Thus the “impossible” relation between lyricism and militarized capital is posed as constitutive of the lyric moment in all its particularity:

when the occupied
 “regrettable”
 wind
 blows in

*

Zoned

*

stones
 peaceful that is
 no-fly

Having seen the poem's clearest attempt at the single lyric voice founder on this contradiction (with a signally clear-headed deliberateness, to be sure), one reads back into the opening sections with a new focus. This reading is more alert to the ways in which those “individual voices” were perhaps already at odds with themselves, to how syntax, rhythm and enjambment did more than simply juxtapose each voice with its opposite number, but at a more radical level produced voice itself out of this very opposition. Within a social totality whose constitutive basis is contradiction, the truth of the continuous, unitary subjective voice *is nothing but its interruption by the “other voice.”*

To indulge in a final musical analogy, I think in this connection of Xenakis' string music, in which dissonance is not simply a relation between individual tones, but something intrinsic to tone production itself. Those long glissandi, percussive attacks, and scraped strings emphasize the outer, dissonant partials in each articulation of sound. The individual musical utterance is not only rendered partial by fragmenting against the resistance of some other sound, but also and more deeply by being itself internally “partialized.” The relation between partial voices within Elrick's “voicings” similarly goes beyond external opposition to locate a kind of speculative identity of such opposition with the single voice itself. In “Dimensions of Calm,” the difference between continuity and interruption, between signal and noise, is not diametrical but dialectical.