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978-0-521-12882-7 - Language, Music and the Sign: A Study in Aesthetics, Poetics and Poetic Practice from Collins to Coleridge

Kevin Barry

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Music and the sign in the eighteenth century*

A study of ideas about music during the eighteenth century is an enquiry into one part of eighteenth-century theories about signs in general. Theories about the sign have not been widely discussed in intellectual histories of this period. Few have given space to the history of what John Locke called *σημειωτική*, or *the Doctrine of Signs*. For Locke signs are, in general, marks which stand for ideas of things: that is 'their proper and immediate Signification'.<sup>1</sup> It is not obvious what place music, or indeed any mode of language other than simple names, might occupy within such a theory of the sign.

Stephen K. Land's history of the movement after Locke, *From Signs to Propositions: The Concept of Form in Eighteenth Century Semantic Theory* (London, 1974), shows us how writers on literary aesthetics, such as John Dryden, Edmund Burke and Hugh Blair, contribute to a re-interpretation of ideas about signs both in linguistics and in philosophy. The elements of literature and especially of poetry provoke doubts about the Lockean model, precisely because the literary use of words as signs appears to exceed the functions of naming and representing.

If language is simply a collection of signs each of which has exactly the meaning it derives from its referent why is a verbal description effectually different from its object, why are different verbal descriptions of the same object qualitatively different from one another, and why are we affected differently by words and pictures? These practical, rhetorical problems, which cannot be raised within the terms of Lockean semantics, make an important contribution to 18th century linguistics.<sup>2</sup>

As much as literary aesthetics contributed to that more general epistemology, so also did ways of thinking about signs affect discussions of literature. We can take the hint from Land that words and pictures are for an aesthetics of literature key elements in a representational theory of writing. During the eighteenth century, at least until the final discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds, painting stands as the type of the 'full' sign, and holds first place

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in any theory of representation. Indeed, studies of literature by such scholars as Jean Hagstrum, Walter Hippel and John Barrell have explored the variety of ways in which the painters and the poets entered into a complex agreement in their 'imitations' of the sublime, of the beautiful, of the picturesque, and of the natural and social landscape.<sup>3</sup>

Much attention has been given to the interaction between concepts of the pictorial and of the poetic. Little attention has been given to the ways in which eighteenth-century thinking also includes another interaction: that between a concept of language and a concept of the 'empty' sign. Such an interaction presupposes ideas about the inadequacies of representation. It looks to music, rather than to painting, in order to describe an alternative and conflicting model of interpretation and of value.<sup>4</sup>

There has been relatively little historical study of the ways in which ideas about music and language interact in eighteenth-century poetic theory and practice.<sup>5</sup> There has been no full study of this interaction which analyses its function both in the writing *about* poetry and also in the writing *of* poetry. It is the purpose of this book to provide an historical study of the place of concepts of music in eighteenth-century poetic theory and practice. I examine first the complex subversion of a representational theory of the sign by ideas about music. Second, I consider the interaction of this non-representational theory of the sign with poetic theory and practice from William Collins to Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Nowhere do I suggest that poets during the eighteenth century adopt some back-dated version of the *ut musica poesis* of Symbolist aesthetics. No significance is given to that cliché. For the process of ideas about music has a quite different perspective. Wherever these ideas emerge in discussions about the origins of language, about linguistic structure, about poetry, or about passionate speech, they tend towards a theory of response and of interpretation as relatively uncertain and free. It is this activity of response as opposed to notions of description or specific naming, which ideas about music and about 'empty' signs are used to analyse.

Also there is little stress on concepts of music being developed in such a way as to provide a model of the relationship between author and text, of expressiveness or intentionality. Instead, the analogy with music is used to define and to articulate the

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relationship between signs and response, between words and interpretation. The response of the listener to the 'empty' signs of music becomes a model of the response of the reader to the text.

Music becomes, in relation to poetry, an analogy by which there can be a movement from a principle of representation to a principle of interpretation. Given that a piece of instrumental music must appear, according to Lockean principles, to be empty of signification, its enjoyment is evidence of the necessity for an aesthetic complex enough to include the pleasures of uncertainty in interpretation and of some free subjectivity in response. Although in 1751 D'Alembert, in the 'Discours préliminaire' to the *Encyclopédie*, writes that 'Any piece of music that does not portray something is only noise',<sup>6</sup> and although Rousseau in his impatient article on the sonata argues that merely instrumental music can signify nothing,<sup>7</sup> the texture of music continued to enchant and to win attention. In 1789 an editor of Aristotle's *Poetics* finds it relevant to describe how music leaves the listener 'to the free choice of such ideas as are, to him, most adapted to react upon and heighten the emotion which occasioned them'.<sup>8</sup> This kind of response to music is paralleled in language-use by at least one practice which radically questions the Lockean principle of representation: the practice of metaphor. One writer on linguistics in the eighteenth century, James 'Hermes' Harris, attributes the reader's unusual pleasure in this figure to his having 'to discover something for himself'.<sup>9</sup> From 1793 to 1810 Dugald Stewart elaborates this interpretative model, specifically in relation to metaphor and to indeterminate meanings in discourse.

Ideas about music support ideas about language which give attention to the process of interpretation. It is these indeterminate processes which are central anxieties for both Wordsworth and Coleridge in the first prefaces they address to their readers: Coleridge's Preface to his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796) and Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 and 1802). The preface of 1796 puzzles over the problem that poems are 'written at different times and prompted by very different feelings', but they are 'read at one time and under the influence of one set of feelings'.<sup>10</sup> The preface of 1802 unfolds the paradox that poetry should be so made as to 'divest language, in a certain degree of its reality, and thus to throw a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition'.<sup>11</sup>

It is therefore surprising that eighteenth-century writings

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A  
 COLLECTION  
 OF  
 POEMS  
 IN THREE VOLUMES.  
 BY  
 SEVERAL HANDS.



L O N D O N: Printed by J. HENRY,  
 For R. DODDSEY, at Tully's-Head in Pall-Mall.  
 M.DCCXLVIII.

O D E S  
 ON SEVERAL  
*Descriptive and Allegoric*  
 S U B J E C T S.

By WILLIAM COLLINS.

—ΕΙΣ  
 Εξημετέρας αναγνώσεις  
 Προσφορές η Μουσά. Δ' Φρση ·  
 Τέληρα δι' αμ. αφιλολαφίας Δ' αμης  
 Ετυμωλ. — Π' αμης. Ομωμ. Θ.



L O N D O N:  
 Printed for A. MILLAR, in the Strand.  
 M.DCCXLVII.  
 (Price One Shilling.)

P O E M S

BY

MR. GRAY.

DUBLIN:  
 PRINTED BY WILLIAM SLEATER  
 IN CASTLE-STREET,  
 1768.

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Plate 1: (i) title-page from Robert Dodsley (ed.), *A Collection of Poems* (London, 1748); (ii) title-page from William Collins, *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* (London, 1747); (iii) title-page from Thomas Gray, *Poems* (Dublin, 1768); (iv) frontispiece from *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone*, Vol. 1 (London, 1765); (v) frontispiece from *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone*, Vol. 2 (London, 1765).

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which link poetry with music have not been more thoroughly studied. The period offers many relevant titles: Hildebrand Jacob, *Of the Sister Arts* (1734), James Harris, *Three Treatises . . . The Second concerning Music and Poetry* (1744); James Beattie, *An Essay on Poetry and Music as they Affect the Mind* (written 1762); Daniel Webb, *Observations on the Correspondence between Poetry and Music* (1769); Thomas Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry, Translated: with Notes on the Translation, and on the Original; and two Dissertations, on Poetical, and Musical, Imitation* (1789). Works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Michel-Paul Guy de Chabanon can also be added. Such works do not include the even more numerous discussions of music in writing on the arts in general, on taste, on language, on signs, and on representation. The published work of, for example, Alexander Gerard, Adam Smith, James Usher, Sir William Jones, Dugald Stewart, and the unpublished papers of such different writers as Thomas Twining and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, are also of especial importance.

In poems also we find images of music. It has been observed that amongst emblematisers of the late seventeenth century it is painting which most commonly appears as the sister-art of poetry. A glance at the emblems prefacing the work of mid-eighteenth century poets gives us an immediate contrast. Several of the early editions of James Thomson's *The Seasons*, of William Collins's *Odes*, of Thomas Gray's *Poems*, as well as of Dodsley's many *Miscellanies*, are illustrated with emblems of various sorts and all of them identify poetry with music. In some instances the poems may be prefaced by an illustration of a song-bird. More usually the picture represents musical instruments (harps, lyres, flutes, and the odd trumpet) to emphasise a convention often repeated in the poems: that the arts of poetry and music define each other.<sup>12</sup>

The general theory of signs in the eighteenth century can best be introduced by considering Joseph Addison's posthumous *Dialogue on the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1726). Addison's purpose is to ridicule and to dismiss the notion that the sign on the medal or coin is an hieratic hieroglyph which might reveal an ancient mystery. He will cancel any Hermetic conventions. In the place of demands for esoteric explanations Addison argues that the emblems are clear and rationally-based metonymies which are

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to be read as conventional representations. This argument, according to E. H. Gombrich, establishes Addison's essay as 'a turning point in the conception of symbolism'.<sup>13</sup>

With a similar purpose but in a more extravagant and prolix manner, William Warburton provides a history of the development of script from picture-writing and hieroglyphics to the phonetic marks of the alphabet. Warburton's history of signs forms one part of his *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738), and his concept of the sign agrees with Addison's insofar as both prescribe an original and determinate relationship between signifier and signified. Warburton's argument is complex (more complex even than that of Vico to whom he is often erroneously compared) and the principles offered in the *Legation* constitute a relatively flexible theory of representation. For Warburton there are three kinds of writing: picture-writing, hieroglyphics and the alphabet. These correspond to three kinds of discourse: the language of action, the language of fable, and catachresis (although this last is called 'metaphor' or 'similitude in little' by Warburton).<sup>14</sup> History, then, is the principle of economy by which each of these forms replaces its predecessor and by which the world can be represented in a more abbreviated and efficient manner. It is Warburton's argument that the early prophetic books of the Bible, for example, can be rationally and exactly interpreted if one uses the historically appropriate convention of discourse. The use of such an historical method of decoding will remove any fanatical belief in 'supernatural Visions':

The judicious Reader therefore cannot but observe that the reasonable, the true Defence of the *Prophetic Writings*, is what we here offer: Where we shew, that *Information by Action* was, at this Time, and amongst those People, a *very common and familiar Mode of Conversation* . . . And the *Fanaticism* of an Action being only supported by this Principle, – that the *delighting in unusual Actions and foreign Modes of Speech is an Indication of that Turn of Mind*; when it is shown that those in Question are idiomatic and familiar, the Suspicion must drop of Course. To illustrate this last Observation by a domestic Instance: When the *Sacred Writers* talk of being *born after the Spirit*, of being *fed with the sincere Milk of the Word*, of *putting their Tears into a Bottle* . . . they speak the common, yet proper and pertinent Phraseology of their Country; and not the least Imputation of *Fanaticism* can stick upon those original Expressions.<sup>15</sup>

All figural discourse can therefore be decided to be simply representational according to the convention of usage and idiom contemporary with it. Any mixture of these conventions is

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regarded as no less than the symptom of a mania. The key to interpreting 'the sincere Milk of the Word' is a recognition that 'this Method of *expressing* the Thoughts by ACTION perfectly coincides with that of *recording* them by PICTURE'. As history economises on its forms of representation there develops the fable and the hieroglyph and, after that, catachresis and the alphabet. One sign comes to stand for many things but a convention of representation remains constant. 'Thus we see the *common Foundation* of all these various Modes of Writing and Speaking, was a Picture or Image, presented to the Imagination thro' the Eyes or Ears.'<sup>16</sup>

The French translation of this portion of the *Legation* appeared separately under the title, *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes*. Its influence on the notion of '*le langage d'action*' in Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and, subsequently, on Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds-et-muets* (1751) has been well documented.<sup>17</sup> Condillac argues, as had Warburton, that '*le langage d'action*' is '*une vraie peinture*'.<sup>18</sup> For Condillac there is a great value in this mode of signification because it simultaneously holds together unanalysed states of mind and feeling. Diderot further extends this notion of the central value of gestural/pictorial action by transposing the mode of the hieroglyph to include all imaginative representation.<sup>19</sup> Synthetic and simultaneous clusters of images, the material of poetry, form '*un tissu d'hiéroglyphes*'; they avoid the discursive and, therefore, represent more accurately states of mind and feeling which are, by their nature, experienced all at once.<sup>20</sup> Because states of mind and feeling exist 'as a whole and all at once' their appropriate correlatives are paintings. Lieselotte Dieckmann has described how Diderot, if only for reasons of completeness, comes to extend this idea of the hieroglyph beyond painting to include music also. However, we can notice here that in this instance of music alone the principle of representation becomes quite destabilised:

Its hieroglyph is so light and so fleeting; it is so easy to lose or misinterpret it, that the most beautiful symphony would not have any great effect if the infallible and sudden pleasure of the pure and simple sensation were not infinitely above that of frequently equivocal expression.<sup>21</sup>

Within any principle of picturing or representing ideas and feelings music proposes a risk of indeterminacy, of loss, of misinterpretation. The epistemological status of signs in music



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can only be radically unstable within a general theory of signs which attributes meaning to reference. In discovering when and how such a general theory of signs turns away from itself, it has become common to recognise Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1764) as a central text. For our purposes here it is worth noting that Rousseau's essay, according to its full title, also 'treats of Melody and Musical Imitation'.<sup>22</sup>

Disagreement about this text between Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man has been about whether 'Rousseau remains faithful to a tradition that is unaffected by his thought.' It is Derrida's argument that Rousseau

stays convinced that the essence of art is imitation (*mimesis*) . . . It is *expressive*. It 'paints' the passions. The metaphor that transforms song into painting can force the inwardness of its power into the outwardness of space only under the aegis of the concept of imitation, shared alike by music and painting. Whatever their differences, music and painting both are duplications, representations.<sup>23</sup>

Rousseau's ideas both of music and of painting therefore support, according to Derrida, a 'metaphysics of presence': both, that is, support an assumption which persists in Rousseau that signs are substitutes for timeless realities, transcendent entities which it is the purpose of language merely to name. Such a perspective cannot notice the emphasis, however unwilling, on the uncertainty of any interpretative response to music which we have cited in Diderot and which we can observe also in Rousseau's famous repetition of the cliché: '*Sonate, que me veux-tu?*'<sup>24</sup> Paul de Man's reading of Rousseau does, on the other hand, allow some room for this hesitant question.

De Man's argument is that Rousseau alters conventional eighteenth-century models. Rousseau asserts

the priority of music over painting (and, within music, of melody over harmony) in terms of a value-system which is structural rather than substantial: music is called superior to painting despite and even because of its lack of substance.<sup>25</sup>

According to de Man the *Essai* asserts and happily persuades that music can imitate nothing: 'Sleep, the quiet of the night, solitude and even silence can enter into the picture that music paints.' The pictorial terms used by Rousseau do not lead back to conventional notions of imitation, but instead they point forward to the meditations of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*:

tel est le néant des choses humaines qu'hors l'Être existant par lui-même, il n'y a rien de beau que ce qui n'est pas.<sup>26</sup>

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In defence of his argument de Man might well have added here Rousseau's definition of the peculiarities of musical imitation as it is found in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1767).

Let all nature be in a slumber, he that contemplates it, sleeps not; and the art of the musician consists in substituting, in the place of the insensible image of the object, that of the movements which his presence excites in the heart of the contemplator. He will not only agitate the sea, animate the flame of a conflagration, make rivulets flow, the rain fall, and torrents swell, but he will paint the horrors of a boundless desert, calm the tempest, render the air tranquil and serene, and spread over the orchestra, a new and pleasing freshness. He will not directly represent things, but excite in the soul the same movement which we feel in seeing them.<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau's general theory of language looks back to Condillac and, perforce, to Warburton. He at once conserves and revises their idea of signs. For Rousseau all language is first of all figurative, but its figural mode is again that of catachresis. He repeats Condillac's notorious example of the primitive savage who, out of fear, first names a man a 'giant'. However, Rousseau revises Condillac by admitting another mode of signs: those of music, which do not represent objects but which give rise to feeling by virtue of the absence of a correlative object.

In a precise way this looks forward to Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth accepts that the first language of passion is figural speech. Like Warburton he argues that this extraordinary language of primitive poetry 'was really spoken by men'.<sup>28</sup> It was at some later date that this linguistic convention became 'a motley masquerade of tricks, quaintnesses, hieroglyphics, and enigmas'.<sup>29</sup> Like Rousseau, however, Wordsworth revises that poetics of figural imitation and defines the poet, as Rousseau had defined the musician, as one who is 'affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present'.<sup>30</sup> More than this, Wordsworth also revises Rousseau. For Rousseau's musician had made present 'in the soul the same movement which we feel' from absent objects when they appear. Wordsworth's poet, on the other hand, has 'an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events'.<sup>31</sup>

An indirect mode of signs, as in music, is constituted first by their relative emptiness, and second by their intention towards a response which is relatively uncertain. Rousseau hesitates between the first, which is a representational principle, and the