

Gesture in Music and Literature – Virginia Woolf

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*I will be well welcome when I come
Because I am coming
Certainly I come having come*¹

This stanza by Gertrude Stein from her *Stanzas in Meditation* embraces the subject of the following article. The communicative and functional level — the way we usually work with language — is put out of play in Stein’s rhythmic and flowing discourse. Rather than functioning, the language starts to formulate itself; we lose the sense of referential meaning and instead begin to work with the poem as rhythm and understand signification as something that evolves.

When language is used poetically it must rediscover or reinvent itself. With a little play on words one might say, “what is expressed in poetry cannot be put into words”,² which suggests that language acts differently when it appears in literature or poetry than when it appears in everyday speech. Roman Jakobson calls this “the poetic function” — that language is its own object. Whereas in everyday speech it seems to coincide with the world, in poetry it indicates itself as expression:

*I will be well welcome when I come
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The language of poetry expresses itself as tone, sound, rhythm — terms that are shared by the worlds of literature and music. This is not a coincidence. Yet this does not mean

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems (1929-1933)*, The unpublished writings, vol. 6, ed. Carl van Vechten (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1956).

² Paul Johnston, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner* (London: Routledge, 1993), 114.

that it is unproblematic to ignore or cross the boundary between music and literature — it is, on the contrary, difficult and in some cases impossible. Rhythm can be an example of how it is difficult to, as a matter of course, step over this boundary. Rhythm is a periodic figure, a pattern elaborated for variation and repetition. In Plato, rhythm is defined as structured movement.

Musical rhythm has its origins in the body, the rhythm of the music moves us, fills us with the desire to move, while the rhythm of language does not have the same firm, inciting force. Yet it is still of decisive importance in our perception of what we read. Literary rhythm is often an abstract concept. If we speak of metric verse it is not difficult to determine syllables and stress, but with prose poems and prose texts in general it immediately becomes more difficult to be completely concrete when we are to isolate rhythm.

Rhythm has to do with sensing on a fundamentally physical level; it is not just something we experience through our eyes and ears, but also something we experience as immediate sensing. It is possible to recognize a poet by his or her “gait”; it is also possible for the reader to have idiosyncrasies due to the same gait — one can be rhythmically out of sync with a work while being able to understand its intellectual qualities, but to point out precisely how a certain poet’s gait or rhythm takes place can be incredibly difficult.

By contrast, the rhythm of *music* is very concrete. It can be quite complex; it can almost be incomprehensible, but if one dissects it, as a rule one will find an immanent system — if a rhythm is written down it almost always has a time in which it should be understood. In modern scored music you nevertheless often find free times, but they will frequently be defined by duration, that means again a kind of structuring of time. In the rhythm of bebop jazz it sometimes seems impossible to determine where we are by the beat, but the musicians have a fundamental pulse from which their playing is possible. This pulse is then surrounded by such complex syncopations and displacements of the beat that, as a listener, one is not always able to catch it, but in order for the playing to succeed all the *musicians* involved must agree to keep in step.

The example of the rhythm shows that even though music and literary language have common concepts, they refer to something very different. Thus, I will in no way claim that they are identical, but rather that family resemblances exist between the branches of art. I'm borrowing this concept from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote about the connection between music and language use as family resemblances.

The musical theme is closely connected to the sentence.³ We cannot replace a single part without the entire context changing character. The verbal sentence can also shift its meaning according to how one places the emphasis and which direction the speech or tone has.

The Danish theologian and linguistic scholar K. E. Løgstrup said:

The sensual medium of speech is sound. Sound takes time[. . .] Sound carries itself and fills up time. This is enough for it to become a tone that attunes the mind. On the other hand, the mind demands variation in tone [. . .] the attuned mind demands pause and rhythm, and it demands that the tone vary in strength and pitch. The tone is not referential[. . .] The mind experiences — in tune — the tone's own meaning.⁴

Løgstrup's thoughts here resemble Wittgenstein's understanding of the way we experience language and music — how we correspond with and to verbal expressions and musical themes.

We understand a sentence based on its referential statement but largely also based on its dynamics, tempo and phrasing. Correspondingly, one could say about the *musical* phrase that a sequence of tones can have essentially different effects according to their performance. The phrase can aim forward in its tempo or dynamics — ritardandos or decrescendos are used. These choices made either by the composer (you can read it from the score) or the interpreter have a decisive influence on our experience of the single phrase and thus of the overall impression of the music. The phrasing can be characterized as gestural insofar as it acts in collusion with the body. If

³ See Johnston, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner*.

⁴ K. E. Løgstrup, *Vidde og Prægnans* (København: Gyldendals, 1976), 12.

one sings a phrase it is evident that the body vibrates, but the very act of phrasing a musical theme may be described as gestural.

On Gesture

Normally gesture is viewed as a concept that designates a corporal expression; an expression that helps support, specify, or clarify a linguistic act (e.g. waving). To interpret music involves a corporality that is fundamental, regardless of whether one is a primary interpreter (performer) or a secondary interpreter (listener). When teaching someone how to play a musical instrument, one often says “imagine that you’re singing this phrase”. The imaginary song makes the understanding of the music more organic; one starts to breath, as it were, with the music as though one were singing. This corporal gesture in the understanding of music also exists when it is a matter of the listener.

As mentioned above, gesture is usually understood within the connection between language and the body. It can also be an expression in itself: an angry gesture does not need words for support, it does not make use of our figural translations in experience — we understand this gesture immediately and without mediation; a threatening gesture *is* anger.⁵

According to the Wittgenstein, gestures support what we express through language, but language itself is also able to “gesticulate”; in other words, language can possess the strength of gesture; the sound itself can engender and produce meaning.

Wittgenstein’s gesture is language’s way of articulating expressive meaning: “Verbal language contains a strong musical element. (A sigh, the modulation of tone for a question, for an announcement, for longing; all the countless *gestures* in the vocal cadences).”⁶

⁵ Within its cultural context. The language of gestures is, like language as such, culturally founded (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Kroppens fænomenologi* (Fredriksberg: Det lille forlag, 1994), 151.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von right, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), § 888.

According to Wittgenstein, gesture in itself can express something — something beyond information. Wittgenstein argues that an *experience of meaning* is decisive to the way in which we treat language — saying something in the tone of language, “gesticulating” in language itself. One may lack the sense of an experience like that, Wittgenstein argues. He speaks of the meaning-blind, who can be likened to a person who has no ear for music. In this way he isolates the concept negatively: “The meaning-blind would not say that a word seemed to lose its meaning if repeated many times nor would they say that every word had a particular face or atmosphere.”⁷ The experience of meaning is about the tone of the language being able to determine or influence our understanding. In the experience of meaning, Wittgenstein argues, it is *not* only the context, the sentence, which defines the final meaning, but rather it is the tone. In the experience of meaning the word is imparted as expression.

The experience of meaning points out *several levels* in the understanding of usage; it singles out the validity of the word as an expression which can go beyond its primary meaning, thus pointing backwards to itself as multiple. Sound and meaning thus embark on a game with each other, a game which is constant and inconclusive.

The concept of *the secondary meaning* emerges through the experience of meaning. When words are used or understood in terms of gesture, there is a shift away from our usual distinction between literal and figurative meaning⁸ toward a distinction between primary and secondary meaning. Primary meaning belongs to the everyday level of language, whereas secondary meaning has to do with the sound and the emotional implications of the word (connected with Jakobson’s poetic function), which points towards music.

In order to grasp this engendering of meaning at several levels, one must possess a sense of words. Wittgenstein holds that *word sensations* exist, that words may have become carriers of tones for us, and one must have an *inclination* to understand these word sensations.

⁷ In Paul Jonson, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner*, 103.

⁸ Wittgenstein rejects this — a figurative level does not give us more knowledge about the work.

Verbal gestures are thus, according to Wittgenstein, the enunciation of meaning through the expression, tone and rhythm of language. In the experience of meaning a withdrawal of the referentiality takes place, pointing away from the notion of the transparency of language. Gesture points towards a game in the use of language, where a word can “gesticulate” with its sound, yet at the same time play with the everyday meaning of the words. Gesture becomes independent in the sense that it comes to express something beyond its information. At the same time, however, it retains a tie to the semantic or primary meaning of language, which means that gesture can be described as a *language game of musical dimensions*.

In the combination of linguistic and musical features of language, as it occurs in Wittgenstein’s gestural definition of language, there is the possibility of pointing out an family resemblance between music and language. In arguing that there is an interplay of a gestural nature between music and language, Wittgenstein himself establishes a close tie to music.

- a. One can lack an ear for music and be meaning-blind.
- b. In terms of meaning, a musical theme is comparable with a sentence. In both cases, the individual parts cannot be replaced without losing the total meaning (the narrative element of music, melody, corresponds with the specific meaning of the sentence).
- c. The musical element is comparable with the gestural element in language. The music-blind will be able to understand and hear the information-language of music, that is, its dynamics, rhythm, tempo. However, he will not be able to understand its musical language (the expressiveness of the phrase). Wittgenstein establishes a distinction within music which can be likened to the distinction between primary and secondary meaning within language, except for the fact that the primary meaning of music, i.e. its tones, rhythm and tempi, only refers to its own system.

The phrasing of a musical theme can be seen as a gesture understood beyond referentiality. Musical meaning cannot be fixed, for it does not refer to something outside itself. This, however, does not make music incomprehensible and self-enclosing. According to Wittgenstein, music is connected to things in its surroundings:

... there *is* a paradigm apart from the theme: namely, the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling. And the theme, moreover, is a *new* part of our language; it becomes incorporated into it; we learn a new *gesture*.⁹

On a functional basis, Wittgenstein thus establishes a very marked tie between music and language. Music's abstract significance becomes active in our usage. Wittgenstein deals with gesture on two levels. On the one hand, the work gesticulates at us if we have a sense of it. On the other hand, our understanding of a piece of music is communicated most efficiently and precisely by a gesture, for instance by whistling a fragment. Gestural communication is gestural in a double sense, then, with a view to both reception and communication.

When I imagine a piece of music, as I do often every day, I always, so I believe, grind my upper and lower teeth rhythmically. I have noticed this before though I usually do it quite unconsciously. What's more, it's as though the notes I am imagining are produced by this movement. I believe this may be a very common way of imagining music internally. Of course I can imagine music without moving my teeth too, but in that case the notes are much ghostlier, more blurred and less pronounced.¹⁰

To gesticulate in language and in music to a certain extent involves the body as the point of departure. In this connection, gesture in Wittgenstein is linked to phenomenology, which views language as connected to thinking, the body and the world. We experience the world with our body before we experience it with language, and this experience exists to a certain degree as a residue in our linguistic relations with the world — the body plays along, so to speak, as the reader of a text and as the musician or listener.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, eds. G. H. von Wright & Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 52e.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28e.

I'm convinced that it is this *corporality* that is crucial for and that manifests itself in our experience of poetic language and of music — it is decisive for our experience of art on a completely elementary level.

In respect to Wittgenstein, problems arise as regards literature, which was and remains my starting point, in that Wittgenstein speaks of gesture in connection with verbal language and not with writing. I will however claim that writing is capable of gesticulating based on what one could call a rhetorical intentionality. Literary language carries an intentionality that makes it capable of coming alive for the reader's *inner ear*; that is, if the latter is open towards sensing these tonal qualities of writing.

The musical or poetic aspects of literary language are corporal impressions that are crucial for our understanding of a specific work — not our intellectual but our emotional understanding.

In continuation of this thesis lies a combination of the *production* and *reception* of a work — understanding in terms of gesture involves an active recipient. The gestures of language aim to influence the reader or the listener, not through the meaning of the discourse but through their intensity.

On Virginia Woolf

To illustrate how these quite abstract parameters can be said to function in a analytic approach, I will now try to point out particular movements that are concerned with musicality and gesture in literature in a modernist short story by Virginia Woolf called "The String Quartet" (1917-1921).¹¹ That I have selected a piece of fiction and not a poem is well-considered in so far that I want to emphasize that the poetic functions of literary language are not less important when it comes to prose. Nevertheless it is no coincidence that the author is Virginia Woolf.

Woolf is, as Modernism as such often is, very pre-occupied with the soundscape of language and by the linguistic constitution of the human mind, often named "stream of consciousness".

¹¹ In Virginia Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, expanded & rev. ed., ed., Susan Dick (London: Hogarth, 1989).

Language is connected with existence in a way that calls attention to values as contingent and unreliable.

Language in Woolf's soundscape is not everyday language. It is determined by rhythm and by tone in a quite radical way. Woolf's language moves in and out of her characters' minds but also pendulates between a poetic and a prosaic use of language and between the words as sound and meaning. I will try to show how.

The short story describes an aesthetic experience — a concert where a string quartet is performing an early piece by Mozart. The story's progress follows and reflects the protagonists state of mind before, meanwhile and after this specific concert. In this progress the expressive features of language mirrors both the plot and the protagonists' different states of mind.

The first passage reflects everyday life in the city of London in terms of fragmentation, alienation. The world and its language is decentered and jumping.

If indeed its true, as there saying, that Regent Street is up, and the Treaty signed, and the weather not cold for the time of the year, and even at that rent not a flat to be had, and the worst of influenza its after effects; if I bethink me of having forgotten to write about the leak in the larder, and left my glove in the train; if the tires of blood require me, leaning forward, to accept cordially the hand which is perhaps offered hesitatingly—

'Seven years since we met'

'The last time in Venice'.¹²

This frame, in which the story takes place, is broken and abrupt in its rhythm, it is marked by caesuras — brakes. These features exposes the vital but existentially fragmented city.

The second part of the story takes place in the concert hall and is a mimic representation of the music experience as it takes place inside the protagonist. We hear a kind of word music reflecting metaphorically the protagonists inner ear. When the string quartet are lifting their bows it sounds like this:

¹² Ibid., 138.

*Flourish, spring, burgeon, burst! The pear tree on the top of the mountain. Fountains jet; drops descend. But the waters of the Rhone flow swift and deep, race under the arches, and sweep the trailing water leaves, washing shadows over the silver fish[...]; leaping, splashing, scraping, sharp fins; and such a boil of current that the yellow pebbles are churned round and round, round and round.*¹³

Music inspires our protagonist into chains of metaphors. As you can hear the language is characterized by alliterations, tonal and rhythmic repetitions. The word-plays refer to the movements of the music on the thematic level. The language is expressive, extrovert and movable as the music it is ment to reproduce.

This passage seems more fluent than the first part; the rhythm is still jumping but the alliterations seem to structure this rhythm so it does not feel frayed. The metaphors are dreamy and flowing, the words are reflecting movements in the water. This dreamy mood is underlining the difference between the bumping world of the street and the escapism of the music experience. It is easier to achieve a coherent feeling in this aesthetic experience than it is in everyday life. In the third part of the story we learn that this aesthetic experience makes the protagonist capable of structuring and transforming the fragmented rhythm of the city, music stabilizes the protagonists feeling of identity transmitted through a musical discourse. In this way we can observe that music is carrying meaning on several levels in this story. The stylistic features — the word/music — are active in developing the story's plot — plot and style reflect each other, sound and sense coincide or merge in a quite complex way in Woolf's story.

In this specific context where I address the musical or gestural features in the experience of literature this story is highly relevant. Her story reflects a musical experience and its effect both on a thematic and on a stylistic, expressive level in a very elaborated way. According to these features you could call Woolf's prose either "musicalization of fiction" with a conception borrowed from Werner Wolf, or you could call the passages where the expression of music is imitated for "word music" (Steven Paul Scher).

¹³ Ibid., 139.

More fundamentally I think that Woolf, also when she is not writing *about* music, is instituting a corporal or gestural language through the musical qualities and connotations, but also by means of her sense of the emotional intensity that inhabits literary language. The stylistic features in Woolf's soundscape are not only a question of style, but rather a matter of creating a rhythmic phrasing that is fundamental and gestural.