Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

At Woodberry

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015

Earlier this month I visited the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University. Founded in 1931 in Widener Library, the room is named in honor of Harvard alumnus, poet and scholar George Edward Woodberry (1855-1930). At present the room is housed in the Lamont Library and was re-designed by the renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto in 1949. The room is a beautiful, modern, reflective space – less Harry Potter than one might expect of the Ivy League, but not quite A Space Odyssey. It is at once homey and daring, comfortable in form and function.

It features a vast collection of 20th and 21st century English language poetry. This includes a huge number of journals and magazines, rare books, broadsides, chapbooks, typescripts and ephemera. What struck me though was the sound collection, which has phonodiscs, magnetic tape (reel to reel and cassette), CDs, DATs, and born digital files. There are over 6,000 discrete audio recordings at Woodberry, beginning with a 1933 recording of T.S. Eliot, which was the first recording of him reading. There are recordings too of John Ashbery, W.H. Auden, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Jorie Graham and many others besides. During World War II, British recordings were sent to Harvard to be protected from bombings and the threat of invasion. It has then a long engagement with the wider Anglophonic world as a safe haven for poetic material.

Woodberry is not alone in terms of sound archives of poetry – there is PennSound, which skews more contemporary, and there is Ubu web, which skews more avant garde. The sound archive though is particularly well developed in the United States. There is institutional support, cultural predilection and a history of recording. There also exists a critical mass that enables a conversation to happen in the first place.

In Australia the possibility is far more limited – it is a smaller country to begin with, but there is less concern with recording and collecting the archive in a defined and accessible place. This latter point is due partly to the lack of criticism – ‘why listen to old poets unless one wants to write about them?’ is the question that is implicitly asked, as if poetry here, or any other small to middling place, could simply produce creative works without thinking of the discourse around it or its own past. That many international authors’ sound recordings are available in American platforms, people such as Tomomi Adachi, Felipe Cussen, Paolo Javier, suggests to me the way in which these are always already in the world and full of possibility. This is to say nothing of the internal diversity of the American poetry communities as well.

However, there is a wealth of poetic activity that goes unrecorded. What strikes me today though is the tension between memorialisation and presence. In much of the discourse, technologically

enabled memorialisation of mundane experiences, such as Instagramming one's dinner, is set up as a counterpoint to being present, to just sitting and meditating on the localism of the asparagus and the food miles of the almonds. This dichotomy though seems like a false one, and brings to the fore the question of what constitutes interesting, if not important, historicisation. One can indeed record one's life and not have it turn into a decades long performance art project concerned with the archive, autobiography or time and being. It is possible to happy-snap and eat slowly, meaningfully.

As the conservation movement may suggest, a zoo can be used to raise consciousness of endangerment, awareness of ecology and the possibility of changing our environmental interactions. There is no reason why technology cannot be a tool through which we come closer, deeper, more intensely to our selves and poetry. It is as simple as downloading an app to make high quality recordings and uploading it to Soundcloud for the world to share in.

Endeavours such as Woodberry's sound recordings are vital resources for informing poetry audiences of the historical and contemporary sonic scape. Poetry lives in a very different way when one listens to it – voice takes on a whole different meaning; timbre and rhythm too. I have been in remote places with nothing but poetry recordings and crickets for company and found succour and community in the audio files of a whole range of poets that had hitherto remained unknown to me. It is a wonderful, and ongoing inheritance that needs greater recognition.

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