A. J. Carruthers. *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1961-2011: Stave Sightings.* **Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. xxxv + 206 (cloth).**

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There are some books of literary criticism whose arguments, seeming so right and necessary, win assent and admiration from the start. There are some books whose arguments, seeming to miss the point or mistake the situation, are easy to dismiss and forget. And there are some books whose arguments require work: an active engagement with their premises and their logic, sceptical testing of each conclusion, and speculation about further consequences. The first kind of book may be the easiest to enjoy, but the third may in the end be the most productive. *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems* is of this third kind: you have to work with it and against it.

A. J. Carruthers's central question seems simple: "What happens when, while reading a poem—long or short—the reader is presented with a musical score?"[1] To answer this question, Carruthers works through five case studies, choosing to focus on North American long poems: Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961); Armand Schwerner's "Tablet XII", from *Tablets* (1968-1999); Books 5, 6, and 9 of BpNichol's *The Martyrology* (1972-1988); Joan Retallack's *Errata 5uite* (1993); and Anne Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* (1993-2011). Carruthers's chapters brim with detailed information about these diverse poems; his book serves amongst other things as an excellent introduction to neglected moments in the history of modern and contemporary American poetry. These poems all deserve wider recognition; each experiments inventively with configurations of sound and sense, and of time and space; and it is through these experiments that the poems reflect and resist their historical situations.

Carruthers's readings are in turn smart and playful, attentive to the smallest details and reaching out to general aesthetic and political concerns. Though Carruthers develops different arguments for each of his case studies, his central thesis is that the presence of a musical score produces a new kind of reading,

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[1] A. J. Carruthers, *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1961-2011: Stave Sightings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), xiii.

"scorewise reading" (xvii). This means that Carruthers is not primarily interested in what is sometimes termed the "musicality" of poetry: "the textures of lyric language" (65), the patterning and effects of verbal sound. He dutifully cites Pater's dictum about art aspiring to the condition of music, but he never refers to attempts by Victorian prosodists such as Sidney Lanier to deploy musical notation in understanding poetic metre. Nor is Carruthers always interested in the particular notes, the melodies and harmonies, which a given score presents. The fact of the score is often what matters most. A score in a poem is not necessarily to be played and it is not mere decoration; a score "is *to be looked at*" (96). An intercalated score asks to be read, Carruthers argues, and it encourages us to read the poetry as though it were a score too. Just as when reading musical staves we read several lines at once, in these poems we must attend simultaneously to multiple lines of discourse or meaning. This is what Carruthers calls a "notational poetics" (xviii).

If this argument for scorewise reading seems formalist or abstract, it has concrete political consequences, which Carruthers elaborates well. This is especially apparent in the book's opening chapter, which explores the musical structuring of, and the incorporation of musical materials in, Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*. This discussion leads the chapter to examine relations between sheet music and live performance, and between notation and recording, and so to consider problems of race and economics more broadly. In Hughes's poem, Carruthers argues, "scoring becomes a mode of reading and writing through political-economic themes" (24). And Carruthers also reads the work's mix of score and poetry as itself a political allegory: the work's mixed quality can be construed as "characteristic of biracial forms, of interracial dynamics of the mixed-race subject in tandem with class, status, public office, personal histories of involvement in activism or political organization" (32). The "mixing of music and poetry" thus means a "biraciality written in to the poem's operations".

There are many benefits to Carruthers's critical method. The chapter on Schwerner deals well with the way in which analogies between musical structures and poetic structures affect the temporal experience of poetry. "The question of poetic scoring begins", Carruthers writes, "with the complexity of understanding how musical time functions when it is found encased within poetic time" (62). This reconfiguration of temporality decisively shapes

Schwerner's encounter with archaic materials, and in particular with the form and the words of a Sumerian hymn. Temporality is historicity, then, and the time of the score transforms the long poem's function and meaning as a poem including history. The later chapter on Waldman extends this investigation of the temporality of scoring. Because a score "is a picture of the time of performance", Carruthers argues, the scores in *The Iovis Trilogy* "store future time, interposing a piece or unit of time within the relatively long time of the long poem" (181). Carruthers then shows that this futury has cultural and political significance. In particular, Waldman's poetry resists the temporality of the modernist and male long poem, and especially of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. In this way, *The Iovis Trilogy* turns the poetics of notation to problems of gender and sexuality: its "allegorical time", the allegory of temporal experience presented by a score in a poem, is also a new and charged "queer time of the long poem".

The chapter on Nichol instead addresses the significance of a score's position in the long poem. There are famous earlier examples in which the placement of the score seems crucial: the appearance in Pound's Canto LXXV of Gerhart Münch's setting for violin of Francesco da Milano's setting for lute of Clément Janequin's setting for voices of a poem by Arnaut Daniel, and Celia Thaew Zukofsky's *L.Z. Masque*, which ends Louis Zukofsky's *"A"*. In both cases, the shift between sign systems seems to allegorise an escape from this world into another world or paradise. Building on these precursors, the choral work which ends *The Martyrology*, a collaboration between Nichol and Howard Gerhard, is for Carruthers "a way of *avoiding* the end"—avoiding the compulsion to bring a linear long poem to conventional completion—and so "of letting the poem go and submitting it to the contingencies of another art" (104). At the same time, this and the other scores which appear in *The Martyrology* not only perform shifts between sign systems and art forms, but mean that musical notation comes to contain alphabetic writing: by the end of Nichol's poem, Carruthers seeks to show, musical notation "has staged a full-scale allegorical takeover, taking the place of the poem itself" (74).

Hughes's, Nichol's, Schwerner's, and Waldman's poems all incorporate actual scores. The chapter on Retallack's *Errata 5uite* extends the analysis of intercalated musical scores to poetry which, in its presentation on the page, imitates musical scoring. Retallack's sequence is arranged in stanzas of five

lines, and like the five lines of a musical stave, the lines in Retallack's stanzas are "separate but interacting lines or registers" (118). The lines of a musical stave signify simultaneity; they allow harmony; and Carruthers identifies comparable effects in *Errata 5uite*. But the analogy is imperfect, as Carruthers's readings also demonstrate. The lines of a single stave never flow one into another, but Retallack's lines do, most notably in the enjambments which Carruthers also identifies. Then there is the fact that the fifth lines of Retallack's stanzas, because they form the end of a single linear verbal sequence, are often shorter than the other lines; the fifth lines often fail to reach the right margin, unlike any line in a musical stave. Carruthers deals with these interactions between synchrony and diachrony well, noting that Retallack's experiments with musical form "disturb" linearity with spatiality, or "supplement left-right reading patterns with vertical-horizontal connections" (136).

On other occasions, however, Carruthers's approach privileges the musical score over the poetry. At a later point he remarks that when

> scores structure poems, lines begin to function like registers. Rather than versifying or enjambing, lines jam together the levels or layers of discursive foundation as they striate the page. (145)

But Retallack's work is more complicated than this: the lines of *Errata 5uite* both jam together discursive levels or layers and versify or enjamb. Scores certainly condition these poems, but the poems also condition the scores.

A minor instance of the same critical move occurs in the book's introduction, during the discussion of an aria from Handel's *Rinaldo* (1711) which appears in Hope Mirrlees's *Paris: A Poem* (1919). Mirrlees introduces the score with some onomatopoeic typographical play; the spacing of the letters of the word *hush* represents an elongated performance: "Hu s s s h". Carruthers rightly notes that this typography is matched by the spacing of the word *diminuendo* in Handel's score: "*dim - - in - - u - en - do*". It is "as if the stave itself is responsible for the segmenting of the words that frame it" (xxii-xxiii). Yet what seems most interesting about this example is the different ways in which the two moments configure textuality and vocality. Handel's score separates the syllables of the word *diminuendo*, and syllables may be pronounced individually, but as a

dynamic marking in a score the word is not to be sounded: its elongation represents the musical phrase's gradual decrease in volume. In contrast, only the third and fourth letters of *hush* are spaced, with the single letter *s* repeated three times, though in this word neither the letter *s* nor the letter *h* can alone be pronounced: the elongation represents the performance of the word itself, and of its final /ʃ/ in particular. So might it be that *Paris* suggests, not a scorewise reading of poetry, or not only, but a poemwise reading of the score, a sounding of the word *diminuendo*? And when the score then concludes with the marking "*ppp*", are we to sound the word *pianississimo*, register the way that triple repetition graphically echoes the repetition of *s* (though without suggesting any performance of the letter *p*), or both? There is the difference, too, that whereas the spatial elongation of *diminuendo* figures the rate at which the volume falls, the *sh!* implicit in "Hu s s s h" is a sound actively and paradoxically calling for silence.

A third example occurs in the chapter on Langston Hughes, when Carruthers discusses the appearance of repeated cent signs (¢) at the ends of four successive lines. The cent signs "resemble cut-common time signatures in music" (23), Carruthurs suggests, which is certainly true. But then Carruthers adds that, when we see this, we realise "we have been reading music the whole time", which is not the necessary conclusion. No musical score repeats time signatures blocked against the right margin; the spatial disposition of the cent sign and the graphic allusion to a time signature mean the musical element is incorporated into the poem according to another logic. Again, a poemwise reading of musical notation seems as apt here as a scorewise reading of poetry. It's a small detail, like the brief reading of *Paris* or the formulation of jamming and enjambment in *Errata 5uite*, but these examples do serve to demonstrate how reading scorewise sometimes limits Carruther's analyses. At the very least, there is more at work here than a determination of poetry by score.

One might also ask, if reading scorewise means attending to simultaneous layers or lines of discourse, even in passages where no actual musical score appears, whether that is very different from familiar modes of critical reading, with their attention to ambiguities, puns, thematic juxtapositions, and so forth. One need not think of the way in which Retallack's poetry places "philosophical discourse in and among other discourses" (127), or of her "multi-level dialogism" (129), as

a kind of musical scoring. One can push an analogy too far, or too often. Similarly, in Book 5 of *The Martyrology*, Nichol describes the technique a friend had used to transcribe conversations, and Carruthers call this a "notational technique" (92), but one wonders whether the transcription of conversation must be understood in terms of scoring. Both *The Iovis Trilogy* and *The Martyrology* explicitly invite the analogy, but one might nevertheless test the analogy's limits. Is Retallack's juxtaposition of discourses subject to the linear temporality of a musical score? Does the transcription of conversation imply performance?

Carruthers is perfectly well aware that scorewise reading is, at least in part, an analogy or metaphor. *The Martyrology*, he writes, calls for the kind of reading required by orchestral scores, with their "unexpected plot twists, complexly woven *motifs* and narrative harmonies" (1060). But those are features of many a poem. (Indeed, the description itself figures the orchestral score with ostensibly literary features [plot, narrative].) One might thus ask whether Nichol's work, in incorporating scores, seeks out the necessary metaphor for its own singular strategies, or instead offers one helpful metaphor for strategies characteristic of many kinds of poetry, or of literature more broadly. In the latter case, scorewise reading might again prove another name for the criticism of poetry. I do not mean to suggest that the poems of Hughes, Nichol, Retallack, Schwerner, and Waldmaan are indifferent or uninteresting; the incorporation of musical scores allows these works to reflect in new and compelling ways on the modern idea of poetry and on habitual ways of reading poetry. But the freedom with which Carruthers deploys his musical metaphors and analogies does raise the problem of specificity. Another way to put this is to note how instructive it would be to compare the kind of reading proposed and performed here with that elicited by other North American long poems from the same period.

But *Notational Experiments* unpacks the innovations and complexities of its five key poems with wit and care, and really the further comparisons it suggests represent the future work which the book helps to make possible. Carruthers's arguments could, for example, be brought into productive dialogue with those of scholars working on Lanier, Coventry Patmore, and other writers, before and after the Victorians, who experimented with musical notation and musical

analogies for poetry,[2] as well as the work of scholars who have recently explored scientific attempts to measure and graph the performance of both metrical and free verse.[3] Reading these post-Second World War long poems in a broader historical context, Carruthers's arguments might in turn be considered alongside more theoretical speculations about the "melodics" of long poems in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.[4] Turning the tables, one might compare the way these poems incorporate musical scores with modern and contemporary settings of poetry to music: setting poetry also has its consequences for sound and sense, space and time, history and politics. It is a shame that Palgrave Macmillan allowed so good and suggestive a book to be plagued by typographical and other errors. But the energy and intelligence of Carruthers's impressive readings are nonetheless very clear.

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[2] See, for instance, Yopie Prins, "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and 'The Science of English Verse'", *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008): 229-34.

[3] See, for instance, Jason David Hall, "Mechanized Metrics: From Verse Science to Laboratory Prosody, 1880-1918", *Configurations* 17 (2009): 285-308; and Jason David Hall, "Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody", *Victorian Poetry* 49 (2011): 179-97.

[4] See, for instance, Simon Jarvis, "The Melodics of Long Poems", *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010): 607-621.