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Mighty Beast: a critical reflection

Abstract

This review-essay considers *Mighty Beast*, a radio feature by Sean Borodale, Sara Davies and Elizabeth Purnell, exploring how it approaches vernacular speech using poems based on auctioneering, sounds of market places and interviews with farmers and other workers. Listening closely to key passages, I highlight the role of Borodale's 'in the moment' process and the use of sound editing as a form of writing, while situating the work within a longer history of livestock poetry and auctioneering in the sound arts. In the end, I argue that *Mighty Beast* is an outstanding piece to help think through larger issues of the future of the radio feature as a format, alongside questions about what can or cannot be depicted in vernacular-focused radio, a genre that seems to work on us at the 'creaturely' scale.

Keywords

cattle yards, auctioneer, radio feature, vernacular

MIGHTY BEAST

Written by Sean Borodale, soundscape by Elizabeth Purnell, produced by Sara Davies, performed by Christopher Bianchi. BBC Radio 3, *Between the Ears*, 2013. 29mins10.

Reviewer: Neil Verma

The music of poetry [...] must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place*. [...]

Of course, we do not want the poet to merely reproduce exactly the conversational idiom of himself, his family, his friends and his particular district: but what he finds there is the material out of which he must make his poetry. He must, like the sculptor, be faithful to the material in which he works; it is out of sound that he has heard that he must make his melody and harmony.

– T.S. Eliot.

1.

'Sale of livestock, sale of remnants, sale of grief.' A cow moos. 'The sale is about to commence. The SALE is about to commence' (*Between the Ears* 2013).¹

Those are the first lines of *Mighty Beast*, a 2013 radio piece produced by BBC Bristol for BBC 3's *Between the Ears* that was honoured with a Gold prize for Best Feature Documentary last May at the Radio Academy awards ceremony, which bills itself as the most prestigious radio accolade in the United Kingdom. That *Mighty Beast* features the sounds of a livestock

¹ All transcriptions are mine. I apologise for any errors or omissions, which are inevitable, particularly in a piece like this.

auction – that antique, primal scene of commercial transfer, of life and death, of mine and yours – is a suggestive coincidence. This year the award ceremony at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London lacked a headline sponsor, and scheduling for next year has been suspended as the organisation plans for a new event designed ‘to celebrate and reflect the radio industry in a dynamic and modern way’, following a recent strategic review (radioacademyawards 2014). ‘Mighty Beast’ nabbed an award whose value, it seems, is up for grabs just now.

Even to call the piece a radio ‘feature’ hints that ownership of that venerable form has more than one interested bidder nowadays. *Mighty Beast* is comprised of excerpts of a poem by Sean Borodale (best known for *Bee Journal*, a poetic account of his apiary) read by Christopher Bianchi in the style of an auctioneer, along with clips of interviews with buyers, yard staff, farmers and butchers describing the decline of small-scale livestock farming as a way of life and reminiscing about Britain’s horrific foot-and-mouth epidemic. One review described the piece using words like ‘dark’, ‘bleak’, and ‘disturbing’ (Maume 2013).

Produced by BBC veteran Sara Davies, and featuring superior sound by composer Elizabeth Purnell, *Mighty Beast* pushes at the restraints of poetry, documentary and experimental soundscape. To listen to it attentively is, on one level, to hear three separate approaches vying for the capacity to depict consolation and discomfort in a livestock microeconomy around Somerset, as the gavel comes down – literally and figuratively. But to reduce *Mighty Beast* to a competition between its creative modes would also be to miss lines of interconnection charted by its many internal sonic tendons and cartilage, as well as to impoverish our awareness of its genetic relation to questions that have long attended the richest sound-based media. On both scores, the piece is not only outstanding, but important.

In fact, although it strikes the ear as quite innovative, the work of Davies, Borodale and Purnell is also refreshingly classical: a particularly pensive engagement with a long-standing conundrum in radio, a medium forever seeking – by all means available – terms of reciprocity with the beast of the vernacular.

2.

We think of 'vernacular' referring to common tongue, but to scholars it captures a dynamic sense of the quotidian 'with connotations of discourse, idiom and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity and translatability' to borrow Miriam Hansen's characterisation. (Hansen 1999, p.59). The term is also associated with functional buildings (as opposed to monumental architecture), such as cottages, workhouses and markets, the places where most lives are actually lived out. Partially related to the Latin *verna* for a child born into slavery, perhaps 'vernacular' also still conveys a vestigial feeling of bondage, of the casual reduction of human to creature, of brutal burdens.

Fragments of these senses are reflected in Borodale's poetry, composed of voices and tones overheard during the author's visits to cattle markets. 'What I like is to sell and today is for killing, even the lambs are,' the Auctioneer cheers. Borodale writes many of his works 'in the moment', as he is literally walking, be it through city or country. In an interview in *Granta*, he speaks of working without pause, on site, and 'in the pressure of time' (*Granta* Podcast 2012) coming to terms with its speed; he is fond of referring to Samuel Beckett's 1930 description of time in *Proust* as a 'double-headed monster of damnation and salvation' (Beckett 1994, p.1).

Keep that in your mind and try to read aloud his Auctioneer's dialogue, which Christopher Bianchi delivers at a rate of 200 words a minute, or faster, by my count:

The auctioneer's conduct in his own words, saying and explaining very quickly. You take your station at the rostrum and use your gavel for signifying a sale. The stock will come into the ring immediately. You have to assess that particular lot, those stock, you have to look at them and think: What are they worth? What is someone prepared to pay for those particular animals? Who's going to buy them? You want to have a nice rolling rhythm. You want to be singing. It's good to have a deep guttural voice which projects. You can sell for longer if you sell from the belly as opposed to using purely

your voice box. Selling for hours, selling everything, selling for hours, selling everything.

Mighty Beast is punctuated with several such closely-miked runs over underscores of various kinds – thumping chimes, plucked strings, rainstorms – with the airspace of the scene narrowing faster and faster until the clap of gavel upon a sounding block dismisses the relentless auctioneering and ejects us into a marketplace soundscape, like a ship passing through stormy narrows into day-lit open sea. Some of these ‘openings’ have extraordinary musical complexity, with layers of market ambiance alongside music and beasts. They let the drama breathe. One instance exactly halfway through the broadcast lasts almost forty seconds. As Seán Street has put it, ‘A place is itself as much a character in vernacular poetic radio as the people who inhabit it’ (Street 2012, p.78).

In the case of the quoted passage above, the pause turns out to be a false dismissal of the auctioneering mode. After ‘selling everything’ we fade up on a real auctioneer audiopositioned at a reverberant distance (‘seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five’), which turns into background noise for the voice of a third auctioneer outlining his methods, and thereby commenting on the first two. ‘One of the weapons that an auctioneer has in driving a trade is speed,’ he explains. ‘So you push push push and you get to your mark: bop-bop-bop, bop-bop-bop [smacks table] Sold!’ In this way, one dimension of the broadcast (poem) becomes grist for another (sound), both of which feed into the third (documentary), giving the work its dense weave, with expressive elements emerging orthogonally relative to one another.

The gusto of the vocal performance itself is breathtaking. Here is one section early in the broadcast describing the selling floor:

It’s like a container, the ring, a bowl, a box, a crate, a room, a field. A bowl, a box, a crate, a room, a field. Points of circumference. Men in their rights, men in their wrongs, out of tune with town. Some say the old characters are gone, but you look around: they’re being made all the time, like that FACE in the mirror, like THAT FACE in the mirror, Yours [beat] I [beat] Recall [beat] Sir!

Doubled phrases populate *Mighty Beast* from beginning to end. Sometimes a repetition emerges low, a little under the breath ('a crate, a room, a field'), but often they showcase transformations in rhetoric, coming higher, slower, louder and with rethought emphasis ('like that FACE in the mirror, like THAT FACE in the mirror'). Pacing patterns are also repeated. Compare the section above with another from much later in the broadcast:

Those were very black days during foot and mouth, ladies and gentlemen, they say the greatest social upheaval since the War. Those were very black days during foot and mouth, ladies and gentlemen, they say the greatest social upheaval since the War. Since [beat] The [beat] War!

In both segments, there is a long phrase reiterated as if to accelerate a voice that is then halted in a bumpy staccato line that precedes a crash of the gavel signifying sale. Much praise is due to Christopher Bianchi, whose virtuosic pacing has a lived-in quality to it, as if learned during an apprenticeship long ago.

A similar 'aesthetic of habit' characterises several of the sound effects. Consider the hand bell that opens the piece. The clapper tracks a set of clearly discernible up-and-down motions at the bending elbow of the arm, a half-conscious scheme of variation meant to let the crowd know selling is about to start:

Ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring,
Ring-ring-ring-ring-ring, ring-ring-ring-ring-ring, ring-ring-ring-ring-ring,
Ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring-ring, ring ring ...

Can't you just see the wear on the varnish on the handle of that bell? One wonders how this might sound to the cattle themselves, whose ears, according to one study, are more sensitive than those of humans, and boast a range comparable to that of a dog (Heffner & Heffner 1983).

3.

Borodale's auctioneer is only the latest vocal virtuoso associated with livestock to fascinate the sound arts. Just two years ago, *Between The Ears* aired *Out Counting Sheep*, a nominee for the Prix Italia by Matt Thompson about oddly musical codes used by shepherds to count their flocks in Yorkshire during lambing season. A generation ago, Piers Plowright created *Mr. Fletcher, The Poet*, a well-known piece recorded during the 1984-85 UK miners' strike, the tale of a working-class Leicestershire poet vividly recalling the ritual local pig butchering during his youth. All these point back to the sunning, wallowing pigs of Dylan Thomas's 1954 *Under Milk Wood*, squealing and snuffing under Llaregyb Hill, something of a *locus classicus* for a British imagination that has long linked (and perhaps likened) radio poetry to the vernacular languages of close human interchange with pigs, sheep and cattle.

Actually, fascination with the rhythms of cattle auction is limited neither by nationality nor era. In the USA, as early as 1891, recordings of auctioneers were listed by the Columbia Phonograph Company, largely for use in exhibitions and nickel-in-the-slot machines (Feaster 2007). With the marvellous new phonograph devices, one could hear recordings of one W.O. Beckenbaugh, known as the 'biggest voice in Maryland' or 'the leather-lunged auctioneer', pretending to auction everything from cattle to dentistry tools. Here is a transcript made by historian Patrick Feaster of one recording from 1897:

Pawnbroker's Sale
of unredeemed pledges,
made by W. O. Beckenbaugh,
auctioneer.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I want your attention, please.

We're about to start the sale.

Now we're ready to go on, first lot I will offer you will be a solid gold ring.

Yes, sir, guaranteed solid gold or no sale.

And I'll thank you for the bid, what shall I have for it, how much?

[Chant] I have one dollar bid, one dollar, one dollar, one dollar, one dollar, one dollar, one dollar, one dollar, two dollars for the bid now, going at two dollars, two dollars for the bid now, going at two dollars, two dollars for the bid now, going at two dollars, two dollars, two dollars, two dollars and a quarter, and a quarter now, two and a quarter now, two and half for the bid now, all done?

Two dollars and a half, going, going going!

Seventy-five, thank you.

[Chant resumes] Going at two dollars and seventy-five, three dollars for the bid now, going at three [...] (Ibid 514).

Other early recordings included low-theatrical gags, sound effects, crying babies and imitated cows. Feaster reckons that while proving the qualities of the new phonograph equipment, these recordings also showcased the speaker as a professional, inviting listeners both to admire his selling skills and to relish the anticipation of occasional flubs.

That is certainly the case when it comes to the pleasure we get in listening to *Mighty Beast*, whose primary performer isn't without trips here and there. Of course, there is also much more going on inside each breakneck sprint. Here is one passage:

This thing for sale looks up to the gravity of rain over Tiverton, considering the years in flux. This is the length of a sheep's day. This is a winter when it's growing thin. There's something going on, in this ewe particularly. Some reckon it's linked to the level of daylight, I reckon it is. What about you, Bob? Face taciturn, long life, encapsulated struggle. Is that a bid? Jerkin of riverside armpits like water bowls, armpits like water bowls. Yes. Once, if you can imagine. Once, if you can imagine. Can you imagine it? Can you imagine it? Yes. Can you imagine it? Yes? Once, twice and gone! Tenderly he enters leading by the halter. Rough sky, rough unsleeping wind, cold November. Just a tractor going about yards. Rain on the face, rain in the eyes, rain in the eyes, rain in the eyes. At the entrance to the holding a haltered bullock making peace with the oddness, that's

how it seems, no field hawthorn, no juttering magpie, crawling around rabbit, nor scrolled mud, nor scrolled mud ...

What's making this ewe particularly thin? What was Bob's struggle? Is the man in the jerkin sweating out of excitement or fear? What goes on next in the mind of that bull with the tear-like rain in its eyes? At this pace – with distractions and asides, drifting between the perspectives of the ewe, Auctioneer and bull – the language hardly gives us time to register these questions, let alone dwell on the ominous itineraries that lie behind each. But ease back just a little on the 'speed of time' to unfold Borodale's poetic vernacular idiom of place, and you will find an array of fractions of narratives about toil just peeking out, like the underside edges of origami.

4.

In an interview for the landmark 2003 series *Radio Radio*, scholar Martin Spinelli asked legendary producer Piers Plowright for his thoughts on the changing role of the author in radio (*Radio Radio*, 2003). After a long history in which a BBC 'radio feature' primarily meant dramatised written works by authors such as Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas discussing their experiences and journeys, Plowright explained, two shifts changed the form for good.

First came a new desire to 'hear ordinary people speak as they speak'. Plowright probably has in mind the emergence of pieces focusing on the voices of documentary subjects, such as Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger's *Radio Ballads* of the 1960s about which Seán Street (2012) has written so vividly; American readers might think of Studs Terkel's oral histories of the 1970s and '80s, or today's *Storycorps* as an example. That desire drives *A Mighty Beast*, as well. We hear the rules of thumb in the working trade, a hallmark of social realism ('I see by an animal the way his head is moving, or the way it's coming down an alleyway if it starts going sideways ...') and homespun wisdom ('There's a funny relationship you get with animals. They got feelin's the same as us. And I think we don't realise they are more intelligent than what we take them for. Yes they are'). We hear how workers glue identifying numbers on heifers and steers at market, discover how an auctioneer watches for tension in the faces and bodies of men about to 'hatch a bid', and learn about 'dispersal sales' in

which a family sells their entire holdings – the sad and sparkling ‘climax of a farming career’.

But the change in subject matter isn’t the only shift Plowright sees in the feature. He also cites the advent of the portable tape recorder, which turned producers and editors into a new kind of writer:

I think maybe what has happened is that the writer writes with a tape recorder and with a razor blade, or now with a mouse, whereas they used to write with pens and typewriters [...] I have a feeling that the revival of the poetic feature is possible, and possibly desirable, alongside the way that we’ve gone: the movement from the invented to the actual ...

Is this what *Mighty Beast* is doing? Yes, but in a circular, scrambled way. Because Borodale wrote ‘in the moment’ as if automatically (not unlike a tape recorder, come to think of it), his ‘invented’ part of the broadcast often gestures more directly toward faithful transcription than do the so-called documentary portions. And indeed, many interviews Sara Davies and Borodale produced for the piece come across as poems, written with clicks of the mouse. Consider this bit, from a former farmer, perhaps the most beautiful lines in the entire broadcast, and clearly selected with care:

I grew up on a farm, and I worked for my parents. Seven days a week. Tough life, but very enjoyable. Never saw any money, you don’t if you work on a farm. Money wasn’t important. Lucky if you saw two or three vehicles a week on the roads. A totally quieter life. Red deer, mink, you name it, you could see it. Beautiful. A great life. I miss it.

Mighty Beast also exhibits how editing can transform the actual into the invented. Early in the broadcast, one stockyard worker says the following while explaining how he drives animals into their pens:

Every animal what comes in the market is an individual. You’ve got to be careful with some of them; some of them’s quick. But even the wilder animals, you’ve got to treat them with the respect they deserve. It’s not their fault they’re a bit on the wild side. It’s how they’re farmed.

In the coda of the broadcast, this same piece of audio is re-used, but in a truncated form, to elevate pragmatic material wisdom to philosophy by excluding the contextual details of poor husbandry that were on the mind of the speaker. All we hear is this: 'Every animal what comes in the market is an individual. Even the wilder animals, you've got to treat them with respect.'

Here I am not much interested in the ethics of making the cut – all repetition is recontextualisation, after all, with or without edits – but rather in its writerly character. As Dmae Roberts has explained, for many producers, finding the inherent poetry in what people say often takes the form of chiselling away extraneous verbiage (Roberts 2010). My larger point is that when it comes to analysing *Mighty Beast* the question of what expressive element is or isn't 'doing' poetry – in T.S. Eliot's sense of 'sculpting' the patterns already hiding in human conversation – collapses as soon as we ask it (Eliot 1942). Just as we can hear the voices of the real market through Christopher Bianchi's lines, we can hear the transformation of Sara Davies's actualities into 'the music of poetry' throughout. If the movement from the invented to the actual is the road to a new poetic feature, as Plowright proposes and *Mighty Beast* attempts, then it is a passage through a hall of mirrors.

But not to worry. The radio feature – perhaps the only exclusively radiophonic genre – has always been a funhouse. 'Trying to define what a radio feature is can take us back into fog-bound waters even more treacherous and uncertain than identifying the nature of poetry,' Seán Street has written. 'It is in the very ambiguities and potential for the dreamlike in sound that radio and poetry touch and become one, a twilight zone between the real – whatever that is – and the imagined.' (Street 2012, p. 4)

5.

The 'plague years' of social and economic twilight are the focus of the second half of *Mighty Beast*. We hear a young man who could not bring

flowers to his parents' grave, for fear of walking through a contaminated livestock field. We hear farmers cut off from the world for a year, isolated on the 'grim horizon' of North Devon. We hear of refurbished markets

turned to ghost towns, a lack of lorries, of snow and collapsed sheds, of pedigreed cattle bred for generations all shot dead in one day, hints of suicides. Anxious dissonances and wintry wind gusts lurk behind the apprehensive Announcer's melodious flow. He speaks:

How do you sell a black choking plume of smoke. You can see it from twenty miles, you know what it is, a pyre for all intents and purpose, a flaming great heap, how do you sell that to a harrowed man? Men bright with news, men dark with news. This is a plague year, I've got here. One thing to balance another, what is its value, what is its value, degree of sadness, great sump of wrought self or balance. The relative volume of various sources of sound. The relative volume of various sources of sound. Will everyone be quiet? Imagine a woman who's managed to lamb a few sheep having to kill them later that day. Imagine a woman having to inject lambs into the heart, having to draw lots on who's to shoot a shedload of sheep? How do you sell the turn of a mind like a winch into nothing?

The terror of the foot-and-mouth plague on a human scale is expertly conveyed, yet our sense of its broad scope is harder to access. How can vernacular radio, anathema to the monumental, convey ten million lives – upwards of 80,000 a week – culled and burned to cinders on the spot?

In a recent book, Salomé Voegelin argues that unlike visual media, sound does not have a 'sublime' in the Kantian sense, no sense of overwhelming multitude or vastness, since no sound has a magnitude that is external to the act of listening to it. 'There is no horizon, no off the map that impresses the fear and awe of my own disappearance,' and therefore no short-circuit of the imagination that can be recuperated through the ameliorating force of reason (Voegelin 2014, p. 117). Instead, for Voegelin, sound offers an irreducibly plural continuum that produces a 'perceptual equivalence that brings with it responsibility rather than power'.

I can't agree with this as a categorical statement, but in this case it seems exactly right. With awe in the face of boundless annihilation unavailable, as well as the remove that provokes reason, *Mighty Beast* opts for 'winching of the mind' *at a creaturely scale*. In the end, perhaps that is the energy that ratifies radio's respect for vernacular talk, toil and tragedy, something

for which *Mighty Beast* is paradigmatic: an aesthetics of the creature that has us listening not only to animals, but as animals.

AUDIO of Mighty Beast is [HERE](#).

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