The Importance of Sound

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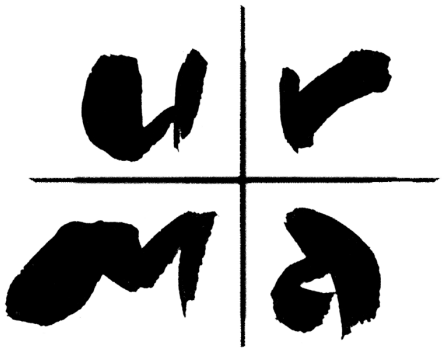

Recorded accompaniment: Hildegard von Bingen, *Canticles of Ecstasy*

When I began working at *Research/Penn State* in 1981, I was a graduate student studying in medieval literature. In 1996 I got a car with a tape player, and I immediately turned off NPR and began playing music like this during my half-hour commute to the University each morning.

My bachelor's degree (also from Penn State) was in English, the Writing Option, a program that then allowed you to have a 12-credit specialization in a field you wanted to write about. The summer before my junior year, I decided I really wasn't interested in science writing, so I switched my specialization from science to medieval literature. My undergraduate honors thesis was on "The System of Values in the Old Icelandic Saga." My master's thesis, completed while I worked part-time at *Research/Penn State* as a science writer, was "Merlin the Prankster: the Character of Merlin from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Robert de Boron," for which I read and translated little-known stories from 13th-century French. In 1984 I was accepted into the Ph.D. program in Comparative Literature with a specialization in Old Icelandic. At about the same time, I began working full-time as a science writer for *Research/Penn State*.

Ever since then I have lived in parallel universes: not finishing the Ph.D. has condemned—or permitted—me to continue studying Old and modern Icelandic for 20 years. Earlier today you saw how my love of Iceland has affected my way of thinking and, in many ways, shaped my life. You have to hear the language, however, to understand how it shapes my writing.

Here is the beginning of one of the Icelandic sagas:

Eyrbyggja Saga

Ketill flatnefr hŽt einn ‡g¾tr hersir ' N—regi; hann var sonr Bjarnar bunu, Gr'ms sonar hersis —r Sogni. Ketill var kv‡nga_r; hann ‡tti Yngvildi d—ttur Ketils ve_rs, hersis af Raumar'ki. Bjšrn ok Helgi hŽtu synir _eira, en d¾tr _eira v‡ru _¾r Au_r djœpau_ga, _—runn hyrna, ok J—runn mannvitsbrekka.

There was a great chieftain in Norway called Ketil Flat-Nose, the son of Bjorn Buna, son of Grim, one of the leading men in Sogn. Ketil was married to Yngvild, the daughter of Ketil Wether, a chieftain in Romerike. Their sons were Bjorn and Helgi, and their daughters Aud the Deep-Minded, Thorunn Hyrna, and Jorunn Wisdom-Slope.

The meaning is not very remarkable, but the sound is stupendous, not only the sound of individual words, but the rhythm and phrasing of the sentences. This was literature meant to be read aloud. Learning to read Icelandic—as well as Middle English and Old French—is one of the things that has convinced me that all literature, all good writing, is meant to be read aloud: that is, that the sound of the words is as important as their dictionary meaning and cannot be divorced from that meaning.

Odyssey

Another experience contributed to my conviction that the sound of words is most important. In 1980 I began producing a half-hour radio series with my former writing teacher and mentor Leonard Rubinstein.

I've already introduced many of you to Rubinstein over the listserv. He is the source of that wonderful saying: "Bewilderment is power." He calls a good article "the painless delivery of information," and said: "Anything looked at closely enough is interesting." But perhaps his most important lesson is this one: "Writing is infinitely perfectable."

Leonard and I produced 260 radio shows between 1980 and 1998, interviewing writers, translators, and scholars of literature around the world. A hallmark of the show was that we had works read in their original languages (as well as in translation). I became accustomed to hearing what Leonard called "the music of the language" before I knew what the words meant.

But the real impact came after the actual interview. As the producer of the show, I had to listen to each tape over and over again to edit it down from the recorded 50 minutes or more to our 28-minute airtime. Doing so has lodged snatches of poems permanently in my brain, along with the voice of the person who read it on the air. For instance:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd: petals on a wet black bough. (Ezra Pound, read by Peter Schneeman)

Who were these people? And who finished them to the last? If dust had an alphabet, I would learn. (Agha Shahid Ali, an Indian poet)

We rode the low moon out of the sky, our hooves drummed up the door. (Rudyard Kipling, read by Jorge Luis Borges)

I am the exile, the wanderer, the troubadour (whatever they say). (Dennis Brutus, an exiled South African poet)

The bud is the emblem of all things, even of those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within: of self-blessing. (Galway Kinnell)

My ancestor, a man of Himalayan snow, came to Kashmir from Samarkand, carrying a bag of whalebones, heirlooms of sea funerals. (Shahid again)

"Haere mai, mokopuna," she would say. And I would always go with her, for I was both her keeper and her companion. I was a small boy; she was a child too, in an old woman's body. "Where we going today, Nanny?" I would ask. But I always knew. "We go down to the sea, mokopu-

na, to the sea . . .” (Witi Ihimaera, read by Murray Martin)

Reading Aloud

Sometimes when I’m stuck on a passage I’m writing, one of these snatches of poem will come to mind. Other times, I’ll go looking for new poems to read aloud. Here are two that ended up on the bulletin board above my writing desk for many years:

How to Tell a Story by Robert Penn Warren
There is a story that I must tell, but
The feeling in my chest is too tight, and innocence
Crawls through the tangles of fear, leaving,
Dry and translucent, its old skin behind like
A garter snake’s annual discard in the ground juniper. If only
I could say just the first word with breath
As sweet as a babe’s and with no history—but, Christ,
If there is no history there is no story,
And if there is no Time there is no word,
For then there is nothing for a word to be about, a word
Being frozen Time only...

It goes on from there, but that’s the part I remember. When I’m particularly stuck, I turn to this poem by Philip Larkin:

To put one brick upon another,
Add a third, and then a fourth,
Leaves no time to wonder whether
What you do has any worth.
But to sit with bricks around you
While the winds of heaven bawl
Weighing what you should or can do
Leaves no doubt of it at all.

That usually gets the words flowing. For more subtle inspiration, I go back to my medieval roots. One of my favorites is the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, somewhat abridged:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour...
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages ...

And of course, I always go back to the Old Icelandic:

Deyr fŽ, deyja fr¾ndr,
Deyr sj‡lfr it sama.
En or_zt’r deyr aldregi
Hveim er sŽr g—_an getr.
Cattle die, kinsmen die,
Every man must die.
One thing only never dies:
A name with honor earned.
—from Havam‡l

Writing

So how does this work into my writing for *Research/Penn State*? It makes me conscious of rhythm and rhyme, alliteration and assonance. It makes me punctuate musically. It makes me take care that the words I choose fit both the sound and the sense of what I want to say.

Here are a few examples:

Jerry Lang is remarkable for his laugh, and his eye. I met the eye first: Touring a new friend,s house, I was lured by a photograph on a far wall. My host found me some 15 minutes later, alone in a darkening room, staring at the image, transfixed. He said nothing, but stood beside me, matching my gaze until by some imperceptible sigh or sign he understood that I’d drunk my fill. Then, “Jerry Lang,” he offered. “You should meet him.”

Your name takes up a kilobyte of space. With the latest $300 16-gigabyte hard drive in your computer, you have 15 billion, 9 hundred 99 million, 9 hundred 99 thousand bytes left for Starcraft, Hover, and Myst, not to mention all those e-mails you absolutely must keep, or the 700 bookmarks on your Netscape browser, and the programs for greeting cards and spreadsheets and slide shows that you hardly ever use, even, if you work for this magazine, the 20,000 names and addresses of your subscribers and eight complete back issues, in case you can’t remember what you wrote. And it all fits on your desk.

Look at a tree. Winter is best for it. Without that distracting screen of leaves, the tree’s shape is clear against the sky—what Kim Steiner likes to call its architecture.

On the margin of the lake where the feeder streams converge are a string of beaver ponds like tourmaline jewels. We paddle softly as we approach, portage neatly over the dam. We hardly notice its intricate web of mud and sticks, how with a minimum of materials it holds back the current and flattens it into a pool. We’re not here to appreciate beavers (they’re so secretive we rarely see them). We’ve come to the beaver ponds on this spring day to see ducks.