

tenderness of a John Haines poem. Let them try the long cadences of Whitman, with their wonderful wrist-grip on physical delight and spiritual curiosity. Let them try to imitate Elizabeth Bishop, with her discerning and luminous eye. Let them attempt the fiery eruption of Robert Hayden or Linda Hogan, or the biting wisdom of Lucille Clifton. Let them imitate and imitate—and learn and learn.

Once again, one of the practices of visual arts students comes to mind as I write this: who has not seen a young painter in a museum intently copying a Vermeer, or a van Gogh, and believing himself on the way to learning something valuable?

Emotional freedom, the integrity and special quality of one's own work—these are not first things but final things. Only the patient and diligent, as well as the inspired, get there.

Sound

TO MAKE A POEM, we must make sounds. Not random sounds, but chosen sounds.

How much does it matter what kinds of sounds we make? How do we choose what sounds to make?

“Go!” does not sound like “Stop!” Also, in some way, the words do not *feel* the same. “Hurry up!” does not sound or feel like its opposite, “Slow down!” “Hurry up!” rustles with activity, leaps to its final punch. “Slow down!” pours from the tongue, as flat as two plates. Sounds differ. Sounds matter. “No ideas but in things,” said William Carlos Williams. And, for our purposes here, no things but in the sounds of the words representing them. A “rock” is not a “stone.”

But, why is a rock not a stone?

Dingdong, Onomatopoeia

The “dingdong” theory, not considered seriously anymore, remains intriguing. Here is Webster’s* definition:

A theory of Karl Wilhelm Heyse, supported (but later abandoned) by Max Müller. It maintains that the primitive elements of language are reflex expressions induced by sensory impressions; that is, the creative faculty gave to each general conception, as it thrilled for the first time through the brain, a phonetic expression;—so nicknamed from the analogy of the sound of a bell induced by the stroke of the clapper. . . . called also the bowwow theory, the poohpooh theory.

How disappointing that such a theory didn’t survive! However, we still have *onomatopoeia*, individual sounds-tied-to-sense, which will be discussed later. But *onomatopoeia* does not extend across any great part of the language.

The Alphabet—Families of Sound

Let us look elsewhere then. What follows is from a textbook of grammar published in 1860.† It divides

**Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition Unabridged (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1958), pp. 20–21.

†This small, leather-bound volume by Gould Brown is *Brown’s Grammar, Improved* (New York: The Institutes of English Grammar, 1860).

It would be reasonable to suppose that I would reach for a more

the alphabet—our “raw material”—into various categories.

The letters are divided into two general classes, *vowels* and *consonants*.

A vowel forms a perfect sound when uttered alone. A consonant cannot be perfectly uttered till joined to a vowel.

The vowels are *a, e, i, o, u*, and sometimes *w* and *y*. All the other letters are consonants.

(*W* or *y* is called a consonant when it precedes a vowel heard in the same syllable, as in wine, twine, whine. In all other cases these letters are vowels, as in newly, dewy, and eyebrow.)

The consonants are divided into *semivowels* and *mutes*.

A semivowel is a consonant that can be imperfectly sounded without a vowel so that at the end of a syllable its sound may be protracted, as *l, n, z*, in *al, an, az*.

modern text. On the day I looked into Brown’s book, however, I wasn’t looking reasonably, but immediately; looking over titles in my own house, my eye fell upon his book, and it was so instantly rich and provocative that, for purposes of this discussion, I have stayed with it. I am not trained in linguistics, and here I only want to make a few useful and important points about sound.

The semivowels are *f, b, j, l, m, n, r, s, v, w, x, y, z*, and *c* and *g* soft. But *w* or *y* at the end of a syllable is a vowel. And the sound of *c, f, g, b, j, s*, or *x* can be protracted only as an *aspirate*, or strong breath.

Four of the semivowels—*l, m, n*, and *r*—are termed *liquids*, on account of the fluency of their sounds.

Four others—*v, w, y*, and *z*—are likewise more vocal than the aspirates.

A mute is a consonant that cannot be sounded at all without a vowel, and which at the end of a syllable suddenly stops the breath, as *k, p, t*, in *ak, ap, at*.

The mutes are eight: *b, d, k, p, q, t*, and *c* and *g* hard. Three of these—*k, g*, and *c* hard—sound exactly alike. *B, d*, and *g* hard stop the voice less suddenly than the rest.

Here we begin to understand that our working material—the alphabet—represents families of sounds rather than random sounds. Here are mutes, liquids, aspirates—vowels, semivowels, and consonants. Now we see that words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the *felt* quality of their own kind of sound.

A Rock or a Stone

The following three phrases mean exactly the same thing. But we would use each of the phrases only under certain circumstances, and not at all under others. The phrases are:

1. Hush!
2. Please be quiet!
3. Shut up!

The first phrase we might use to quiet a child when we do not want to give any sense of disturbance or anger. (No mutes are here.)

The second phrase is slightly curt, but the tone remains civil. We might use it in a theater when asking strangers to stop talking. (This phrase makes use of four mutes—*p, b, q*, and *t*, but in almost every case the mute is instantly “calmed down,” twice by a vowel and once by a liquid.)

The third phrase is the most curious and instructive. It is abrupt; it indicates, unarguably, impatience and even anger. Someone using this phrase means business. (In this phrase the mutes, *t* and *p*, are not softened; rather, the vowel precedes them; the mutes are the final brittle explosion of the word. Both words slap shut upon their utterance, with a mute.)

One group of phrases does not give conclusive evidence, but it does suggest that there is, or can be, a correlation between the meaning, connotation, and actual sound of the word.

Now, what is the difference between a rock and a

stone? Both use the vowel *o* (short in *rock*, long in *stone*), both are words of one syllable, and there the similarity ends. *Stone* has a mute near the beginning of the word that then is softened by a vowel. *Rock* ends with the mute *k*. That *k* “suddenly stops the breath.” There is a seed of silence at the edge of the sound. Brief though it is, it is definite, and cannot be denied, and it feels very different from the *-one* ending of *stone*. In my mind’s eye I see the weather-softened roundness of stone, the juts and angled edges of rock.

Robert Frost’s

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Read the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, by Robert Frost, keeping in mind exactly what is going on—the pause within a journey, the quiet, introspective voice of the speaker, the dark and solitary woods, the falling snow.

The initial four lines are rife with *w*’s and *th*’s; *f* is there, and *v*. Three sets of double *ll*’s. The heaviness of the vowels is increased by the use of diphthongs. The two words that end with a mute (*think* and *up*) are set within the lines and thus are softened. All other mutes are softened within the words themselves. One could scarcely read these lines in any other than a quiet, musing, almost whispered way.

One can say any number of things about the little horse of the second stanza. It is the only object in the poem on which the speaker focuses. It is the only other living thing in the poem, and it is as willing as the speaker for the moment is hesitant to continue the journey.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

ROBERT FROST

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

In any case, we are drawn by the speaker to look at the little horse too, and as we do so the sounds of the whispery introduction, the interior monologue, no louder than the snow falling, are interrupted with little raps of sharper sound—not mallets, not that heavy, but *different*. “My little horse must think it queer” is not a very rattling line, but the sound of “think,” with its lightly snapping *k* this time followed not by a softer sound but by the snippet “it,” and “queer,” an echo of the *k*, makes it altogether livelier than the first stanza. “Stop” is a rap of a sound, then it is quieted by the rest of the line. After “lake” there is a momentary chasm, a fracture of silence out of which a different kind of electricity flows before the line swings and the adjective “darkest” repeats the *k* once more, two taps of disquietude.

In stanza 3 the reversal has taken place. Instead of the guttural mutes being quieted—swallowed up in a splash of softer sounds—they rise up among and after the soft sounds, insisting they be heard.

The first hard *g* in the poem occurs on the first line of this third stanza: “he *gives* his harness bells a shake. . . .” Though the *g* is instantly quieted by the two *h*’s, the moment of introspection is almost over, and the ear anticipates this with “bells” and with the word “shake”—louder than “lake,” more forceful. In the following line the *k* repeats in the very meaningful word “ask” (the traveler is not the only “asking” creature in the poem); and this line as well as the following lines of the third stanza end with mutes. Altogether, in this stanza, we have “shake,” “mistake,” “sweep,” and “flake,” while, in the two stanzas preceding, there has

been only one such moment (the end word “lake” in line 7).

Something is stirring, in the very sound; it leads us to ready ourselves for the resolution in stanza 4. There, “the woods are lovely” takes us exactly back to the mood of the first stanza, but the second half of that line thumps out “dark and deep,” both words beginning with a mute and ending with a mute. They represent, in the sound, themselves, and more than themselves. They say not only that the woods are dark and deep, but that the speaker has come to another place in his mind and can speak in this different way, designating with the voice, as with the gesture of an arm, a new sense of decision and resolution.

Line 2 of the last stanza both begins and ends with a mute, and there is the heavy *p* in “promises” in the center of the line. Lines 3 and 4, the same line repeated, are intricate indeed. “Miles,” that soft sound, representative of all one’s difficult mortal years, floats above the heavy mutes pacing to the end of the line—“go,” “before,” “sleep.” The unmistakable, definite weights that are the mutes help to make the final line more than an echo of the third line. Everything transcends from the confines of its initial meaning; it is not only the transcendence in meaning but the sound of the transcendence that enables it to work. With the wrong sounds, it could not have happened.

I don’t mean to suggest that Frost sat down and counted out the mutes, aspirates, etc., while writing the poem. Or that any poet does anything like this. I mean to suggest that poets select words for their sound as well as their meaning—and that good poets make good

initial selections. Of course they also revise. But they have already—"naturally," one wants to say—worked from such a font of knowledge and sensitivity that often near-miracles of sound-and-sense have already happened.

How do they do this? Language aptitude differs from person to person, we know. Also, just as a brick-layer or any worker—even a brain surgeon—improves with study and experience, surely poets become more proficient with study and "practice."

Verbal skills *can* be learned. They can be discussed and practiced. Then, a wonderful thing happens: what is learned consciously settles, somewhere inside the chambers of the mind, where—you can count on it—it will "remember" what it knows and will *float forth to assist in the initial writing*.

Frost kept no jottings about sound while he wrote *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. He did not need to. He was a master poet. The poem is an extraordinary statement of human ambivalence and resolution. Genius wrote it. But more than one technical device assisted, the first of which is an extraordinary use of sound.

More Devices of Sound

A POEM ON THE PAGE speaks to the listening mind. Here are a few of the time-tested, enduring, and effective devices that have been used over and over. Each of them brightens the language and helps to hold the reader in thrall.

ALLITERATION, strictly speaking, is the repetition of the initial sound of words in a line or lines of verse.

When alliteration is well done, where is the line between enough and too much? Don't worry about excess. Practice this sonorous and lively device. Notice it in poems you read. Someday with the help of alliteration you may write lines as delicious (and excessive) as these, by Robert Penn Warren:

The bear's tongue, pink as a baby's, out-crisps to
the curled tip,