Refiguring Prose Style

Pace, Tom, Johnson, T.R.

Published by Utah State University Press

Pace, Tom and T.R. Johnson.
Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities For Writing Pedagogy.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9275.

👉 For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9275

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=298842
When a writer tinkers with the style of a particular sentence, she considers it and its different versions from a reader’s point of view. She might read the sentence aloud as she wonders which version sounds best, and, as she does, she bifurcates or doubles, for only when she becomes two can an inner dialogue ensue in which one self offers some words and the other listens and responds (see Murray 1982; Johnson 2003, 52–56). The writer can facilitate this inner dialogue, as Joseph Williams (2002) suggests, and can even anticipate to some degree how readers will experience a particular sentence, if she considers the sentence in the context of various stylistic principles of “clarity and grace.” These principles are tools for opening one’s ear to one’s own prose and thereby building a stronger link to one’s reader. But this is only the beginning. In the following pages, I hope to suggest what the ear, when open, can do. And I hope to point the way toward something like an ear-oriented approach to composing.

To open the ear, to write with the ear: these are, I admit, vague, wholly metaphorical goals. But I’ve begun to wonder about the possibilities that might emerge if I press toward them in a spirit of literalism. I have a hunch that, by exploring these metaphors, floating back and forth between relatively rigorous theoretical reflection about the writer’s ear and the more evocative flights of fancy they invite, borrowing and stitching together scraps of academic, poetic, and mystical discourses, I might manage to sensitize my own ear, render it more open, more active—and perhaps enable others to do the same.

More concretely, if the writer is constantly switching into the role of the reader, “listening” to prose in the act of producing it, then I’d like to suppose that the tension between these two roles (writer/reader) might support a yet subtler possibility, an analogous sort of tension between what, at the moment, I want to call the semantic and the auditory. While plenty of sounds have no particular meaning (the buzz of the fluorescent light above me, for example, which I no longer even notice), I’m interested in the possibility that meanings always carry traces of something like
sound—that is, an eventlike energy that works on the body, potentially stirring feeling, even inciting movement. As Stephen Katz and Walter Ong have noted, even when we silently read, our vocal chords register tiny movements, perhaps sending signals to the brain and other parts of the body as part of the process of constructing meaning (Katz 1996, 137; Ong 1982, 8). And it is this auditory element in the composing process—meaning’s sonic residue or resonance—that has led me to ponder the secret significance of the writer’s ear as that which enables one to craft one’s prose to move one’s audience.

I first began to wonder about the challenge of teaching students to write with their ears when I chanced upon an article published nearly twenty-five years ago in *CCC: Barrett Mandel’s “The Writer Writing Is Not at Home” (1980).* In this fascinating but too seldom cited essay, Mandel asks us to imagine how the act of writing proceeds not from consciousness—that screen crowded with the familiar, elaborately codified projections we call “reality”—but from elsewhere, a mysterious domain of intuition and sudden insight which, when we’re there, seems to transport us, carry us away from the experience, say, of the chair we’re sitting in, the desk we’re sitting at, the buzzing fluorescent bulb we’re sitting under, and all the other features of the external world that ordinarily take turns holding our attention. I found that I agreed wholeheartedly with Mandel’s assertion that the writer, writing, is not at home. But I’ve never thought of the writer as merely “checked out” or lost in an undifferentiated daze; on the contrary, he may not be at home, but he is intensely focused, wholly absorbed. Where then, I began to wonder, does the writer, writing, go?

I’ve already noted the movement in which the writer shifts back and forth between the roles of writer and reader, and I think that Mandel might suggest that this regular oscillation enables a broader kind of movement, walking the writer, as it were, to different, changed sorts of perspectives, to new insights and to greater engagement with the movement that is yielding those insights. Mandel might say that listening to prose, opening the ear toward it, can open in turn that mysterious realm of intuitions, sudden insights, and greater meanings. What’s more, if the writer’s prose is “meaningful” enough, it can spark a roughly corresponding movement in audiences, and precisely this possibility is what writers are “listening for” when they intermittently play the role of the reader. They are listening for places in the text that are potentially powerful moments in the reader’s experience of it: words, phrases, sentences, and passages that are sequenced in ways that allow language to leave behind the simple
Writing with the Ear

black-and-white of the printed page, to move out into the world to change things, to travel, echo, and amplify as they spread into receptive channels, like sound waves. They are listening for moments that resonate, that vibrate with the potential to lead their drafts forward and also to lead their readers to follow along in agreement. When student writers find them in their drafts, they say things like “This part sounds good—right here, I feel I’m really getting somewhere, making some headway. I want to pursue this idea in my next draft.”

In other words, whenever we pause in our writing to switch for a moment to the role of the reader, we aren’t so much looking at the letters and words on the page but rather we look through them in search of “fleeting vision-like sensations, inklings of sound, faint brushes of movement,” and this activity, “this turning in on itself of the body, its self-referential short-circuiting of outward projected activity gives free rein to these incipient perceptions” (Massumi 2002, 139). When a writer engages issues of style by asking herself questions like “How does this sound?” or “What if I rearranged this paragraph back around the way I first had it?” she is, I think, playing with the sound of her text, manipulating matters of rhythm, tone, balance, repetition, tempo, and so on in the service of her semantic mission, ultimately to conjure the power of her meanings to move people the way music does. She is playing with the tension between the auditory and the semantic. She is, as Mandel would say, not at home, not trapped among the external coordinates of the ego like a boat tied to a dock; and I would add that in the push to create moving prose, to fill her pages like sails with propulsive energy, she is listening for places where her prose seems ready to take wing, to sing. In so doing, she has begun to pass the way of Alice through the looking glass—and into the open ocean of her own ear.

The mysteriousness of all of this is tempered, at least in Mandel’s essay, with simple, practical advice for teachers. He recommends that teachers assign what he calls rote writing: “the copying of well-written prose, selected by the student . . . into a copy book” (1980, 376). Rote writing is quite similar, if counterintuitively so, to freewriting, and, in one sense, it’s even better, for it allows “the student’s whole organism to have the experience of producing mature prose without conceptualizing consciously at all” (376; emphasis in original). Mandel adds that two offshoots of rote writing are parodying and syntactic modeling, for, like freewriting, they create a climate in which the nonconscious phenomenon of powerful intuitions can occur, intuitions into the “general feel” of forceful prose, the “sound”
of good writing, and these intuitions can become benchmarks or templates in the backs of students’ minds that students can imitate or critically undermine when they draft their own work.

We can further temper this mysteriousness by turning to the history of rhetoric, for the ear’s significance was perhaps not so secret to the ancient Sophists, nor, in the modern era, to Kenneth Burke. And of course, generations upon generations of poets have written about it (I’ll consider some examples in a moment) and, moreover, plenty of today’s students, in a curious blend of the quirky and the commonsensical, comment on its importance in their own composing processes when they say things like, “I like how this sounds.” I’d like to explore some of these resources, for the mysteriousness of the ear has kept the field of rhetoric and composition from paying it much attention and, in effect, has almost entirely removed this crucial tool from what we consider the teachable repertoire of rhetorical powers. And then I hope to balance this handful of historical observations with remarks that reopen and rejuvenate the mysterious power of the ear.

**SOME BACKGROUND MUSIC: THE EAR IN ANCIENT AND MODERN RHETORIC**

When the ancient Sophists first began to teach the arts of rhetoric, they often did so, according to Debra Hawhee (2002), in private palaestra—that is, in places where their students also learned wrestling and other sporting activities. The daily activity of these wrestling schools was usually accompanied by someone playing an aulos (a reed instrument akin to bagpipes) to set “the rhythm for all gymnastic exercises,” for the rhythms helped to focus the students’ minds on their repeated physical movements, so that these movements, after much disciplined repetition, could become refined habits and shape their automatic responses to actual situations (145). These ancient teachers understood, moreover, that music can be motivational: as Hawhee puts it, they understood “that music has . . . [a] transformative capacity . . . that falls outside the category of reasoned, conscious learning, as rhythms and modes invade the soul, and, at times, excite the body to movement” (146). Additionally, they associated particular rhythms and tones with particular moods and, in turn, used background music in the palaestra to inculcate a particular ethos or character in the students, perhaps a sense of shared identity or communal belonging.

Beyond the gymnastics, the rhythms of the aulos inevitably flowed into “recitations and sophistic lectures, producing an awareness of—indeed,
facilitating—the rhythmic, tonic quality of speeches” (Hawhee 2002, 146). Given this environment, the Sophists, not surprisingly, became keenly interested in the way verbal techniques of balance, repetition, and other quasi-musical, literary effects could promote a strong, inward surge of pleasure in the listener. This pleasure carried a feeling of merger with the collective, a feeling of knowledge that seemed more meaningful than the knowledge developed by strictly rational inquiry or empirical observation—a feeling, finally, that, while rooted in music, was increasingly understood by the Sophists as indispensable to moving an audience with words (see Johnson 2003).

This interest of the ancient Sophists in the power of carefully organized sound to incite feeling and movement—call it e/motion—persists in modern rhetoric. In A Rhetoric of Motives (1962), Kenneth Burke describes the way that verbal formality, as such, has a way of inviting the reader/listener to follow the contours of the form, anticipating certain sounds with a slight feeling of increased tension, and, as the anticipation is fulfilled, a corresponding release. Stylized language, he says, subliminally stirs a feeling of “collaborative expectancy,” as when, for example, the reader can’t help but start “swinging along with the succession of antitheses,” getting caught up in the rhythm, anticipating its moves. This phenomenon, adds Burke, “this yielding to the form, (58)” actually paves the way for a broader assent to the content, the substance of the position associated with the musical language, and thus style plays a key role in persuading an audience. In short, Burke knew what the Sophists knew: style is more than aesthetic ornament, for it can function as a powerful rhetorical strategy. It can engender, focus, and discharge energy—a sort of textual background music that can buoy and propel the rhetorical enterprise.

I observe this phenomenon every semester. When I introduce my students to various stylistic devices that allow them to shape their sentences with attention to balance and rhythm, they nearly always remark that revising along these lines seems to energize them and to make their essays much stronger. One student told me that her efforts to turn her thesis sentence into a chiasmus were giving her so many new ideas for her paper that she felt as if her mind were about to “boil over.” Others describe a new sort of immediacy to their prose, as if their writing had come much closer to speech and involved them in the rhetorical situation where, before, they had felt relatively less connected. Some students tell me that, as they read their newly stylized papers out loud, they feel like Martin Luther King or a presidential candidate, for the formalism
they've begun to dabble in has unleashed a palpable capacity for rallying and moving audiences. They are learning to stir a feeling of “collaborative expectancy,” sentence by sentence, in their readers. They are learning to write with their ears—that is, to use the ear as a studio for designing and testing methods and techniques for moving audiences.

When a writer moves in this direction—toward an active engagement with the ear—he is not simply indulging feelings, but finding a new strength in relation to the whole domain of feeling, a sense of linguistic options and agency that put him, to an extent, in charge of shifting moods, states of mind, and e/motions. He has embarked on a path of empowerment, a movement that registers as exuberance. We might say that he has begun to engage the place where emotions as waves of bodily energy would seem intertwined with the waves of energy that constitute the auditory. He is playing in the dynamic between sounds and semantics. Allow me to digress, to dig into these possibilities a little further, for the issue of emotion has long vexed the field of composition and some new work by Brian Massumi has provided useful means for exploring, in particular, the exuberance my students describe when they discover style and the power of their ears.

**BRIAN MASSUMI ON MOVEMENT, AFFECT, SENSATION**

Every emotion, Brian Massumi says, is always comprised of two elements, “intensity” and “quality” (2002, 24-33). More specifically, an emotion is an experience that has been qualified, turned into a quality—that is, named and nailed down in the sociolinguistic codes that constitute determinate, intersubjective meaning, the discursive grid of social space. Some part of emotion, however, resists full capture and articulation, and this aspect, being a function of the feeling’s strength and duration, is called intensity. This is the dimension of emotion that takes the subject out of him- or herself (“I’m beside myself!”) and scrambles to some degree the codes of semantic ordering and control, as in a sigh or an “Ugh!” or a “hmmm” or in the cartoonists’ standard (a)signification for angry profanity, “# % @ * X + !”. If quality is essentially information, then intensity is broadly analogous to energy, for intensity belongs to nonlinear processes that feed back or suspend or speed up the established flow of time, engendering tension and release through a rich, vibratory motion all its own, much the way music does. In fact, an emotion’s intensity is to its quality just as a song’s music is to its lyrics: they do not antagonize each other but instead can amplify or diminish or redirect each other, resonat-
Writing with the Ear

References to singing and music are difficult to resist here, for intensity lives in the ear. More precisely, if touch is the most direct sensory medium for intensity, the ear might be understood as the place where our sense of touch is most acute and refined, for while the skin registers relative degrees of heat and cold, vicissitudes of pressure, simple textures, pain, the joy of an affectionate caress, and perhaps a handful of other basic sensations, the ear goes much farther: it can translate a seemingly infinite variety of waves of energy from the air into equally vast nuances of meaning. The ear, we might say, is the opening through which sound passes into sense, form fuses with content, and otherwise random noises can be reversed to serve the symphony of the semantic.

The ear’s potential as the bridge between intensity and quality (for, again, they should not be thought of as simple opposites) seems virtually unlimited: consider the strangely humanoid ears of bats, how these ears allow bats to map miles of caves, their flight organized and guided by musical improvisations and echoing feedback in the dark spaces between the stones. Perhaps ancient poets and Pythagoreans aspired to a similar degree of openness in their ears when they spoke of listening to the music of the spheres as the basis for the intellectual work of describing reality. In the language I’ve been using so far, such an openness is synonymous with freeing qualities (data) to radiate intensities (energy)—and, as new qualities emerge therein, freeing the intensity in those to discover yet newer qualities, from which yet greater intensities can roll forth and so on, ad infinitum. In the most work-a-day terms of the writing classroom, this is the practice of revision.

This batlike flight into intensity is an activity of which all our senses are capable, but in which the ear leads the way, for, again, the ear is where intensity lives. In fact, the ear, as Joachim-Ernst Berendt notes (1983), is the very first of our senses to begin working/playing, for even in the womb, long before any of the other senses have been engaged, the child hears its mother’s heartbeat and soon thereafter can listen to sounds from the outside world (139). Though the other senses develop soon enough, I’d like to suppose that the ear continues to play a vital and prominent, if subliminal, role in our experience of identifying and weighing values and meanings. We engage the ear precisely this way when we play around with prose style in an attempt to move our readers.

This process is, however, necessarily and paradoxically just as mysterious as it is social. For when we do the reverse, when we turn away from the
ear and turn intensity into a quality, articulating it in images, diagrams, or models, we pretend to organize and trap intensity in the domain of the eye (“Now I see what this means!”), but instead we largely lose it, for we have presumed to halt an intrinsically mobile, transformative force. Intensity, in fact, might best be thought about via a version of Zeno’s paradox: if a tortoise were given a head start in a race against Achilles, and Achilles reduced his distance from the tortoise only by half every five minutes, Achilles would never reach the tortoise, because he could cover only half the distance; even when he was hard upon the tortoise, he wouldn’t reach it, for he could divide the distance only by half, and then by half again, for any distance is infinitely divisible. Similarly, intensity imitates or follows the infinite divisibility of space. That is, intensity is the infinite self-involution of sheer movement toward places that are in fact not places at all but rather middlings between various terms or points. Like Achilles approaching the tortoise, intensity is essentially a vibration that can emanate ever more deeply with the real but abstract energy/ substance of sheer relationship, moving inward and away from the endpoints that bracket or break off relationship. It instantiates an endlessly receding interior, a whirlpool or vortex, just as Achilles does in the moment when we would expect to him pass the tortoise.

Put simply, intensity, says Massumi, cannot be described through a frozen system of fixed terms. Rather, it is a “continuously variable impulse or momentum that can cross from one qualitatively different medium into another. Like electricity into sound waves . . . or noise in the ear into music in the heart” (2002, 135). Indeed, the more we qualify it—that is, pin it down in images and concepts—the more directly we conduct it into other media through which it changes and even upsets the coordinates or qualities used to express it. Thus, a particularly successful sentence, for example, might induce a chill down the spine of one reader or a rich belly laugh in another, or, in major cases, a new political agenda for someone but not for another, or even, in rare cases, a new reality for the collective—but always only fleetingly, for not only is intensity ultimately indeterminate, it is always on the move.

The difficulty of discussing intensity’s movement derives, as Massumi asserts, not simply from the sheer absence of any reliable terms for it, but precisely because terms, as such, are the opposite of movement: “term” implies endpoint, fixity, stasis. We might try to think about movement through our own bodily experience, the feeling, say, of walking or falling or embracing, but traditionally, such discussions of bodily experience
have relied on a naïve empiricism or subjectivism that fails to account for the pervasive, ongoing influence of culture in shaping, even dictating such experience. More recently, as Massumi explains, we’ve tried to talk about the experience of the body as influenced, even constructed by culture, but, to do so, we’ve invoked a kind of grid made of various “discourses” of race, class, sexuality, and so on, and then we assume that each body is constituted as a point of intersection of particular discourses (see Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*). The problem is that we have little way of accounting for how a body moves or changes from one point on the grid to another. We might build into our grid certain discourses like those of growth, age, education, health, illness, analysis, cure, and so on, but, as Massumi insists, we still can’t describe the transitions from one point on the grid to another. What’s more, the mystery of how to describe the much subtler, nonphysical movements by which a person changes his or her mind or moves from a particular habit of emotion to another (“Ah, I guess I like the liberals more than I realized”) would seem utterly insoluble. Faced with this mystery, Massumi dares us to follow the path initially suggested by Henri Bergson early in the last century, through which we don’t simply suspend what I’ve been calling the discursive grid but rather come to experience all of external space itself only as a sort of retrospect, a fatigued falling away from the primary reality—the primary reality being the mysterious spark, the inward-directed, endlessly self-involuting, transformative pulse of sheer movement. Massumi challenges us, ultimately, to stop staring with such stunned fixity or vacancy at the cloud of exhaust fumes that is external space and instead to listen to and pursue this primary reality, this interior—which is always in flight.

Our problems, of course, proliferate: why, for starters, must we link movement to vague concepts of inwardness? Massumi explains that when a body is moving, it is in an unfolding relation only to its own purely abstract but intrinsic capacity for variation, an unfolding relation to its own potential for indeterminacy, its very real “openness to an elsewhere and an otherwise than it is, in any here and now” (2002. 5). This potential is real but abstract, something like breath, the expression of life, and, though incorporeal, it inhabits the living body the way energy is said to reside in matter. Like matter and energy, the body and its real-but-abstract potential for movement and change, says Massumi, are mutually controvertible modes of the same reality, inseparable fellow travelers (5). This energy, this abstract, vital, breathlike capacity for movement and change is present in every emotion, every moment in which we feel “moved.”
Again, it is intensity and it lives in the ear. Intensity is what we cultivate when we write with our ears.

**TEACHING INTENSITY**

Rather than explicitly delineate these concepts for my students, I invite them by a variety of means to contemplate the sorts of experiences these concepts identify in the hopes that the students might begin to identify them and cultivate them in their own ways. For example, I ask them to reread and revise their papers many times, and, as they do, I require them to use a variety of stylistic principles and devices that inevitably draw attention to the sheer sound of prose, its potential for rhythm, symmetry, tonal consistency, and degrees of parallelism. Also, I try constantly to model for them what it means to have an open ear by listening with utmost attention to everything they say in discussion and by commenting on how they sound as they read their drafts aloud.

In class discussions, I encourage inquiry into the ways that the general sound of a passage reflects a particular mood, and, in turn, a certain set of moral coordinates, even political commitments. For example, I’ve often assigned students to read Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” (1979) to get them to see how ambitious the project of listening to one’s own language can become. Rich’s essay is difficult, but as we work through it together, we devote special attention to how Rich casts revision and the work of listening to herself, how such activities are wholly engaged with charting subtle mood shifts and, too, broad political movements. In the essay, Rich describes how she first began to notice the tone in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own,* how she then began to consider some of her own work along similar lines; how she heard a “deliberate detachment” and a composed and apparently cool character in her work in the early 1950s, which reflected a similar sense of confinement foisted on her by that era’s narrow codes for acceptable feminine roles. This tone, she began to see, was a sign that, as a poet and perhaps as a person, she was dying, for life depends on a certain freedom of mind: “freedom to press on, to enter currents of your own thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained. . . . You have to be free to play around with the notions that day might be night, love might be hate, nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or call experimentally by another name. For writing is renaming” (610). She notes as well: “Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical
direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (604). In the terms I’ve been using, revision plays with the external grid, jostles it in ways that allow for the expression of intensity, and, as Rich maintains, without this freedom to express intensity, people can die.

Rich quotes several of her own poems, and I find that students like to work with this material. In fact, once they become comfortable with Rich’s ideas and talking about her poems, I might devote a short unit of the semester to having students explicate via large-group discussion an assemblage of other literary texts that, together, can get them moving in these same directions toward more flexible, more moving, more lively language. I might have them discuss Robert Lowell’s short poem “Reading Myself” (1977), which fades into silence with the final, chilling, elliptical line that, tellingly, has no verb: “This open book . . . my open coffin”(183). In the context of the Rich essay, Lowell’s poem has a special impact. I might also have students look at the Lowell poem alongside these lines from William Blake’s introduction to the Songs of Experience:

Hear the voice of the Bard  
Who Present, Past, and Future, Sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
That Walk’d among the ancient trees. (1966, 210)

Blake’s “Holy Word” seems to be a window onto pure intensity, for it “Walk’d among the ancient trees” and entered the ears of the Bard; and the Bard, open to this pure intensity, can now range freely through time and speak to different readers at different moments. In fact, the lines are a direct command to the reader to open the ear to this pure intensity, to enter into relationship with this supremely mobile connector that would seem to enable, in turn, eternal life.  

To get my students thinking about this ecstatic dimension of relationship-as-such, this sheer middling that the Holy Word incarnates, I might ask them to elaborate on the lines from Lowell and from Blake alongside these from Niyi Osundare: “The well-spoken word is the bride of the ear”(62); and “The simple word / Is the shortest distance / Between two minds” (2002, 228). I might add into the mix Walt Whitman’s appeal in “The Mystic Trumpeter,” in which he rhapsodizes on the layers of intersubjective connection he hears in the playing of this “strange musician / hovering unseen in air” who “vibrates capricious tunes tonight”:
Come nearer bodiless one, haply in thee resounds
Some dead composer, haply thy pensive life
Was fill’d with aspirations high, unformed ideals,
Waves, oceans musical, chaotically surging,
That now, ecstatic ghost, close to me bending, thy cornet echoing, pealing,
Gives out to no one’s ears but mine, but freely gives to mine,
That I may thee translate.

Blow trumpeter free and clear, I follow thee,
While at thy liquid prelude, glad, serene,
The fretting world, the streets, the noisy hours of day withdraw
A holy calm descends like a dew upon me. . . .
Thy song expands my numbed imbonded spirit, thou freest, launchest me,
Floating and basking on heaven’s lake (1953, 366-68).

I often introduce Whitman’s lines by pointing out that Whitman revised *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life, and thus he understood the work of writing as Rich does, as a struggle to open the ear yet more and more, rather than to manufacture, à la Lowell, a coffin. By having my students explicate the lines from Lowell, Blake, Osundare, and Whitman in terms of each other and in the context of Rich’s essay, they can begin to find their way to experiences of the sort I delineated earlier in connection with Brian Massumi and Henri Bergson—that is, toward an experience of the ear as that which triggers and directs potentially endless expenditures and expressions of energy, for it is the substance and focal point of ever-evolving relationships and interactions, their catalyst. It is the vibrating essence of the transindividual dimension, for through it, we pass out of ourselves, experience ecstasy/ex-stasis, and, as athletes put it, we “enter the zone” or go “on a roll.” The ear invites us into a trance of pure creativity that, at the time, seems perpetual.

While these poems might seem too remote from the students’ immediate life-worlds, I think that when the students grapple with them as a group, the poems can begin to shed light on one another and become more accessible, more useful. To get them started, I might point out that Whitman’s trumpeter, in the first stanza, is cast as a great listener (“haply in thee resounds / Some dead composer”) and that the power of his trumpet originated in the power of his ear; and that this power Whitman would seem to appropriate or imitate in listening so intensely, perhaps in order to become something like a trumpeter himself, as if the
trumpet-generating power of the ear were floating forward from out of the past. As the students circle back and forth through these poems and their possibilities, developing a short paper, say, on the role of the ear in writing, intensity can begin to radiate among them and they might even bring new zeal to the crafting of their own prose.

Of course, I hardly intend to present these poems as a canonical set of masterworks on sound. In fact, I can readily imagine asking students to bring in other texts that offer particularly inspired insights into, examples of, or particular techniques for cultivating intensity, inspiration, and style. Thus I’d like to end or perhaps trail off (trail in?) by offering a few thoughts about the ear that teachers can contemplate or elaborate or refine or simply bear in mind as they listen to—and model the act of serious listening for—their students. In short, I offer by way of closing a handful of thoughts that can help us to open—and thereby write with—our ears.

**INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MYSTICISM OF STYLE**

One might well ask, “What can I do—what literal, practical activity can I undertake—to open my ear, to cultivate intensity?” While I can offer no simple, foolproof method, I can suggest that there is much to gain by training one’s ear upon one’s breathing: listen to your own breath, focus your attention on and even “read” your body’s more or less rhythmic interaction with the ethereal energy that is an essential substance and expression of moment-to-moment survival. The more closely we listen to our breath, the more deliberately we engage this abstract energy, and the longer we sustain this engagement, the more “inspired” we become, the more “moved,” and the more open to yet greater movement and transformation. What I’m describing, of course, has traditionally been identified as meditation, an apt word for the state of mind for the writer, who, as Mandel says, is not at home. Such focus seemingly enables us to metamorphose into a wave of energy/sound ourselves and frees us to roll indefinitely from one medium to another, breathing, as many yoga teachers say, “into it,” as we leap across the divide between Self and Other to communicate with our readers—a process at once miraculous and utterly natural.

By listening to the breath and exploring this intensity, perhaps the body can resonate to the degree that its points of resistance or displeasure are drawn into contrast, conceptualized, articulated, “qualified,” and, as blockage, they can then be opened and their intensity freed to
rejoin the larger resonating field of the breathing body. This is probably the goal of Freud’s famous “talking cure,” of therapeutic writing, perhaps of all cathartic activity. Through the ear, we achieve this inward focus and flexibility; we breathe new openings back into the dancing sea of intensities, the tossing harmonies of our flesh so that they may coalesce and heighten and flow forth to move and change other bodies. In short, what might seem a private, even solipsistic, endeavor is in fact fully rhetorical, even political.

If, as Walter Pater famously put it, all art aspires to the condition of music, then we would do well, as writing teachers, to remember James Joyce’s lesser-known rejoinder, which suggests that all music aspires to the condition of language (Ellman 1972, 104). In the words I’ve been using here, we might say that not only are intensity and quality not in conflict, but rather they aspire to the condition of each other, enabling and animating each other. To forget this point is to make the mistake that Leopold Bloom, in the “Sirens” episode of Ulysses, observes in his friend Cowley, who is lost in his love for music: “He stunts himself with it; a kind of drunkenness. Better give way only half way the way of a man with a maid. Instance enthusiasts. All ears . . . head nodding in time. Dotty. Thinking strictly prohibited” (Ellman, 108). Despite Bloom’s warning, I’d like to help my students move a little closer to the experience of Cowley. And then, of course, to return from it and then drift back to it again, oscillating between the auditory and the semantic in order to intensify both.

How do I do this? I model it, I use some of Sondra Perl’s (1979) exercises for accessing the felt sense, and perhaps, above all, I resist any lock-step recipe that would encumber my and my students’ ability to cultivate the playful quicksilver spirit of intensity. For the ear, in a sense, is the first drum, but it needs no drummer—for it beats on its own like a heart. And, in so doing, it enables a dance, for the writer always writes in movement, a vibratory feedback loop between the role of writer and reader.

This is the humming bifurcation I described in the first paragraph of this essay: composing as a practice of play. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 101-133), play has its own autonomy, its own discrete, independent essence. It is a to-and-fro movement, a middling or relation-as-such, and it never posits a goal that would end, once and for all, the activity of play, for the goal of play is always simply to keep playing, to move ever more deeply into the space between the endpoints that bracket the interval of play. The purpose of play, we might say, is to slip away or coalesce into an earlike whirlpool that leads to eternity.
And, as exotic as that might sound, some commonsense renditions of this same point can illustrate fairly directly how it applies to the composition classroom. If play constantly renews itself in repetition and if it might be said to use the player for its own manifestation, like an occult force that takes possession of the player to speak through him or her, then we would do well to follow the advice Matthew Parfitt offers in “Room for ‘Us’ to Play: The Teacher as Midwife” (2003). What can make class discussion most lively and productive, argues Parfitt, is a certain loosening of preconceived goals, an openness to the unpredictable, and specifically the use of lots of relatively low-stakes assignments that can relax students and promote substantive conversation as opposed to the hollow, stiff, obsequious grade-seeking performances that the opposite approach so often elicits.

As Massumi (2002) notes, when someone is playing soccer, for example, he or she works not just according to expectations and “unwritten” rules, but rather plays with and around these to escape codified structure and enter, instead, the realm of creativity, surprise, and intensity. Such a player, in fact, is developing a style and working with style as such. To play with style, as Massumi says, is to toss unregulated intensities into the mix that will charge the game anew, change it, and launch new vectors of becoming, all of which the referee must watch closely in case some move crosses a line or a rule that is deemed essential to the continuity of the play as such (77). The player who plays with style and develops a style is broadly analogous to the student writer, and the referee who is watching for important rule infractions is one of the roles played by the writing teacher. Of course, another role for the teacher is to encourage students to play with sound and experiment with style, for style is what makes a star.

When a writer works with style, she relaxes her concern for rules, goals, and grades, even the goal of representing some objective reality. That is, she does not polish her prose merely to ensure that it will serve as a transparent window onto some extratextual objects. Instead, she has left behind all such tensions between representations and their objects to enter the domain that Gilles Deleuze (1994) associates with the simulacrum, a place of dazzling freedom, where possibilities are endlessly put into play, a space that is Dionysian or, in a utopian sense, schizoid (67). In this sense, when we teach our students about style, we no longer have to worry that they will struggle with the blank page and complain that they don’t have any ideas to write about, for writing, in this sense, is never
properly “about” any particular thing any more than music is. It is writing, in a relatively pure sense, as writing. This is not an escape from meaning or the realm of qualities, not a flight into purely auditory indeterminacy (as in Carroll’s Jabberwocky or in Joyce’s Finnegans Wake), for intensity is no more opposed to quality than one’s right leg is opposed to one’s left. Rather, enhancing one’s relation to this mysterious dimension or force can enhance, in turn, one’s meaning: this is what goes on when one crafts one’s prose in order to move readers.

Given the Dionysian/schizoid freedom that style makes available, we must also understand style as the definitive test and object of the authorial will, for working with style means breaking up comfortable habits and clichés, commonly held approaches and, finally, all that depends, unreflectively, on familiar precedents. We might even suggest that to work with style/simulacra is to practice a form of theater—what William Blake or Antonin Artaud might call the devil’s theater—for in this theater the actor, notes Deleuze, has given up trying to represent some reality to herself and/or to the audience and has instead become consumed with action, with movement as an intrinsically and quintessentially subversive force, the self-involution of which fleetingly disbands the determinate grid of familiar and routine meanings in order to transform them and rejuvenate them (1994, 5-11).

When a writer paradoxically brings tremendous will to bear on style and, at the same time, suspends preconceived goals, rules, and ideals, when he plays with utmost energy with the rhythm, tempo, and harmony of his sentences, he might ultimately rework a particular run of words a thousand times—and then resolve to keep the sentence the way he originally wrote it, the final version identical to the first. Nonetheless, a giant change, a permanent change may well have blossomed very nearby—that is, in the writer. Having sifted and surveyed a considerable expanse of possibilities and synthesized their various strengths and weaknesses into a certainty that the best choice is, in fact, the one he is using, he has opened and strengthened his ear. Perhaps this is how learning works: like music, learning is a constant repetition led forward in the darkness by sparks of variation. In reworking a sentence or run of sentences repeatedly, the writer becomes involved in a playful repetition that is not, as Freud would have it, a repression of some supremely threatening, abysslike Other, but rather the very throb thereof—a kind of chant. Like the singing of bats, it builds a reliable cognitive map and a home in what might otherwise seem merely the inky darkness, the cavelike abyss of social/textual space.
Working with style turns the void into a fertile source, a primary experience of the infinitude of intersubjectivity’s interior.

More specifically, if movement allows us to experience what we call time, then rhythm is the special type of movement that allows us to experience that which is beyond time, ultimately leading us to our beloved source and goal, the beautiful wisdom of that which gives. This, says Sufi mystic and musician Hazrat Inayat Khan (1996), is the primordial rhythm of being. And it permeates our moment-to-moment experience not just as heartbeat and breath but as an ordering principle in our social interaction such as a wave to a friend, a handshake, a nod of the head, an interval of speech, and, most obviously, lovemaking. We might do well to let this insistent pulse focus our lives, very broadly, on the more conceptual two-beat groove of action-and-result. The question, more pointedly, becomes what does my action give? What new actions does it engender? Like all ethical perspectives, this one implies an extremely rigorous awareness of style: How do various versions of a passage differ in what they can and cannot do? What do they give?

Consider, in these terms, the legend of Orpheus as a kind of moral fable. Orpheus was such a gifted musician that, as Robert Graves translates, he “not only enchanted wild beasts, but made the trees and rocks move from their places to follow the sound of his music” (112). On a particular hillside in Thrace, a number of ancient oaks are “still standing in the pattern of one of his dances, just as he left them” (112). So great were his musical powers that when his wife was bitten by a serpent and died, he used them to charm his way down into the underworld, the land of the dead, in order rescue her and bring her back to life. Orpheus’s music had seemingly unlimited rhetorical force, for he could persuade the gods to overturn a death, and, in so doing, transgress a fundamental feature of the natural order. Orpheus, however, had to make a deal: as he conducted his beloved back into the world of the living, guiding her with the sounds of his lyre, he could not turn back to look at her, for if he did, he would lose her irrevocably to the dead. Tragically, in the final steps of his journey, Orpheus did look back, and his wife indeed vanished back into the depths.

What might this mean? In the terms I’ve been using here, we might suppose that the power of Orpheus’s music, at its greatest, was a function of his love for his wife, and its intensity was so great that it could override the anchoring, qualitative terms of the spatial grid, those that separate life and death. Most important, it dramatizes the supreme value of the ear
and the artist’s need to have full faith in it, for when Orpheus turned back to look at his wife, seeking to capture the certain truth of her safe return with his eyes, his faith in his ears implicitly wobbled, and all was lost. That passage outward, where Orpheus tragically forfeits what would have been his greatest triumph, might be seen as the passage that opens the ear to the supreme intensity. What ethical axioms follow from this fable? In simplest terms, have faith in your ears, keep playing with sounds, for this, again, is the royal road to love’s victory over the most ruthless tyrant on the external, qualitative grid of space: death.

The myth of Orpheus helps me think about a certain sacred, musical dimension of writing, an aspect of writing that enables people to fall in love with it and build their lives around it. As explained by Khan (1996), whenever we enjoy something, returning to play with it over time, we are essentially enjoying that something’s music—that is, its refusal of stasis, its ongoing vibrations and movements. Khan adds that music is the only pure art form, for the others are alloyed with idolatry, which is to say, stasis (2-3). Only music is free to move, to reconstitute constantly, and whenever anything moves, it is vibrating, sending out music. This point is dramatized in an Eastern legend thus: when God tried to induce the human soul to take up residence in what the soul perceived as the prison house of the human body, God ultimately succeeded in getting the soul to enter by having the angels sing, as if demonstrating that a soul in a body is potentially an angel in song, supremely mobile and free, a perpetual process, an essentially and infinitely revisionary entity, vibrating pure music eternally.

Learning to play music is an apt metaphor for learning to write with style. The only purpose in learning to play music, says Khan, is to become, essentially, musical in one’s thoughts and actions, ultimately to the degree that one perceives all being as musical—that is, as endlessly harmonized and rhythmically balanced processes of action and result (111). Playing music and writing with style, in this sense, are forms of healing and prayer: they seek to open the ear to release the soul so that it may express itself freely, know itself fully, and do its work in the world.

As Joachim-Ernst Berendt (1983) notes, an ancient Christian legend claims that the Virgin Mary conceived Christ through her ear, for the ear is the most spiritual of our sense organs, the one, as we saw in the myth of Orpheus, with the richest relation to the abstract capacity for moving us around in the interpersonal domain of relationship-as-such—that is, of Love. It is the organ, Berendt adds, with the most direct connection
with our ultimate origin, the primal sound (140): just as Western spiritual traditions suggest that “In the beginning was the Word,” so too do Eastern traditions offer similar understandings of “OM.” Berendt adds that the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* is known in Tibet by the title *Bardo Thodol*, which means “Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate State,” and it is to be read in a whisper into the ear of the recently deceased to ensure the person’s safe passage into eternity (145).

This activity hinges, Khan might suggest, on the fact that a soul is simply a sound. And this is also why we respond so directly to sounds and that is why we are intoxicated by music. Sound, finally, is best understood as some dimension of one’s own consciousness that has become active and mobile, pouring out invisibly through the ear. This is what I mean, at the moment, by writing with the ear. When the ear opens, it teaches us that rhythm and tone are the language of the soul. Only with an open ear can we practice the science of breath, which, as Khan implies, is synonymous with a number of other interchangeable practices: the philosophy of music, the religion of humanity, the art of self-emptying, the cultivation of rhythm, the elaboration of tone. Perhaps the discipline of rhetoric trails off or comes to an end in the place where mysticism always begins: chanting the riddles of vibration and movement in their very birthplace—the temple of the writer’s ear.