7

GOLD IN THE ORE

The Sounds of English

This chapter may look as if it were about some such abstraction as acoustical theory. It is actually about the way we use our bodies—instruments of flesh and bone—to produce the sounds we call voice: the sounds of poetry and all human speech. We can realize how sensitive the mouth is and what care the brain takes of it if we contemplate a "homunculus" (see p. 152)—a representation of the way a human being would look if the proportions of the body corresponded to the brain area devoted to each part. More brain space is needed for the mouth than for all the rest of the body except the hands.

We can think of words as having not only a mind (their meanings) but also a body—the structure of sound in which their meaning lives. Most poets, who are not Platonic in their love for language, care as much for the body of their words as for the mind. They like to feel words in the mouth, as Andrew Glaze does with "freedom":

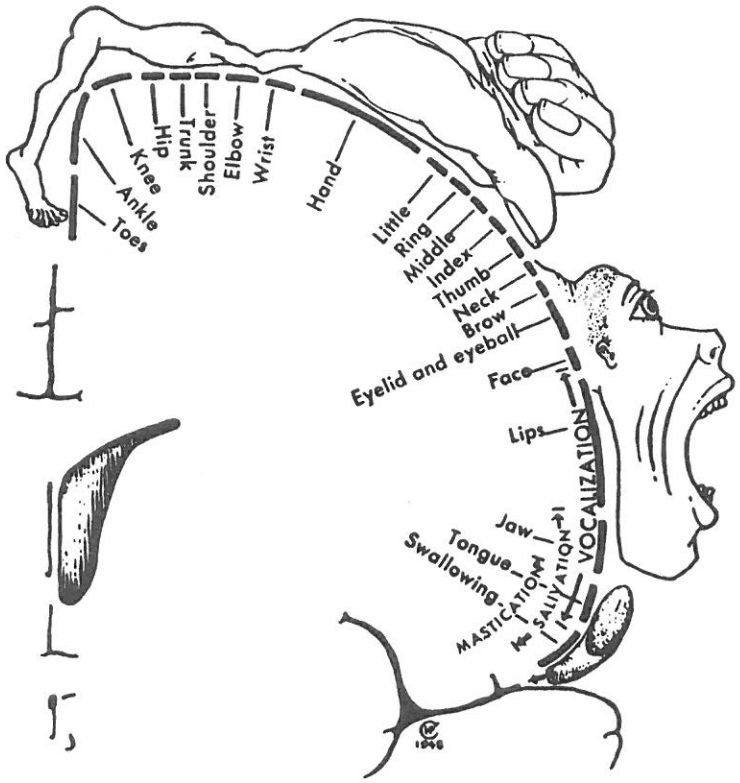
> FREEDOM!—roll it about on the tongue.
> It is certainly a spiritual sound.
> One vowel is like a running white horse.
> The other is like a drum blow. . . .

Thomas Lux is another who savors language as a gourmet does food:

> *There is a sousaphone*
> *on the glass coffee table.* He mouths
> this opening, and thus far only, sentence, delighting
>
> in the *o͞o* sound, how it contrasts nicely
> with the later harsher adenoidal (*glăs, kôfē*)

sounds: The range of a novelist,
he thinks, the ear of a poet!

Wallace Stevens is speaking for many good poets when he says "words above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds." The sound of poetry, what Robert Frost called "the gold in the ore," is what we turn to now.



A poem comes to us first as speech, on sound waves that register as barometric changes against the drums and gauges of the ear, an apparatus so sensitive it takes notice if the pressure against it varies by 1 part in 10 billion. "A breath of the mouth becomes a picture of the world," said Johann Gottfried von Herder, ". . . everything that man has ever thought and willed . . . depends on a moving breath of air."

We hear poems even when we seem to be taking them silently from the page. Tiny wires attached to the speech areas of the throat have picked up electrical currents—evidence that the muscles were being stimulated during silent reading. The body participates sympathetically with what it experiences. Colors affect us physically: Experiments have shown that fixing the eyes on pure red can raise blood pressure and accelerate heartbeat, whereas fixing the eyes on pure blue can have a tranquilizing effect. Images of

sound must affect us no less profoundly, since as very young children we were more at home in the world of sound (which we had known even before birth) than in the world of sight. The rest of this chapter will be about the physical nature of speech. This is not theoretical material to be merely read; these are physical facts to be acted out physically—to be felt and tried in the mouth as we read.

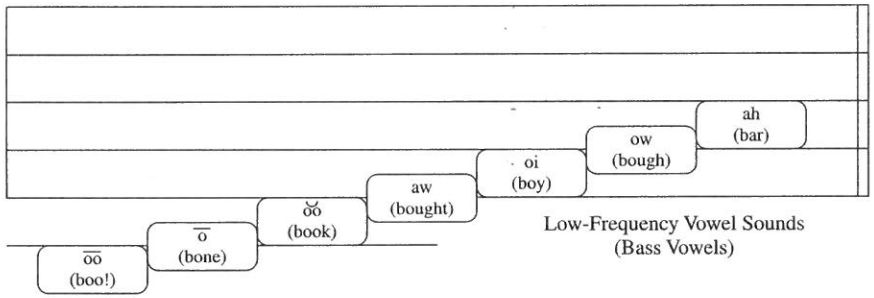
Not Sense

The tongue shapes and molds sound. Speech
becomes sensation in the mouth vibrating
on the palate and the teeth—touch
done with more than fingertips transmutes
itself to rhythm in the ear. Words outleap
meaning and turn into a way to move.
We speak the names that objects will become.
Voice wakes the light, and we begin to see
the shadows leaves can make against the wood.
We say Earth spins, and suddenly the clouds
move like ghosts of old ones bringing rain
that loves the growing things upon the ground.
I listen to your breath against my skin
and wait for you to name the way you feel,
to tell me where you've been and where you go,
to find the shape of things we share and have
to give. I lean and whisper words to let you see
the beauty that I watch when I'm with you.
My tongue slips nimbly past my teeth
and finds lips ready to caress
the line of small round scars that mark
your cheek. Nothing mars the surface
of your skin; what is is graceful and words
could never see it any other way. I watch with senses
more perceptive than my eyes, and let you touch me
more than once or twice. Your voice says little;
sound echoes in my senses like the wind.
You fill the dark passages of form with murmurs
that inhabit me until I learn it's sound not sense
that fills the world, that keeps me warm.

GAIL TREMBLAY (*b.* 1945)

VOWELS

Our speech sounds are conventionally divided into vowels and consonants. With vowels the airflow from the lungs is not impeded. If we pronounce *a e i o u,* we can feel that we are nowhere obstructing the breath but only, by



Frequency Scale of English Vowel Sounds

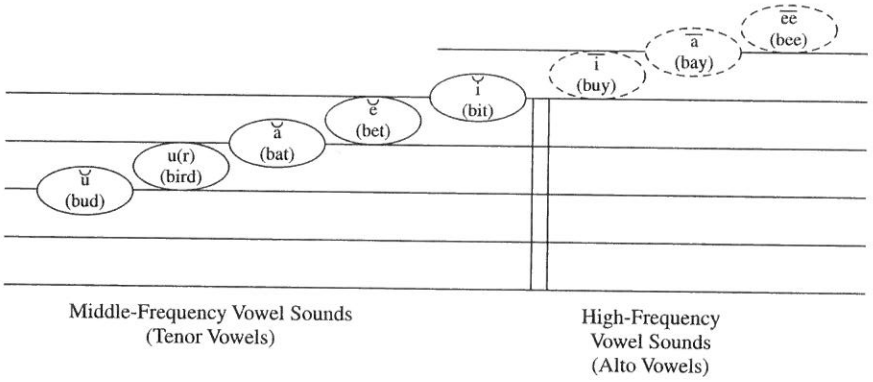
raising our tongue, rounding our lips, and the like, reshaping the instrument it flows through. How we manage so complicated a process would astound us if we thought about it.

Our feats of hearing are equally incredible. We follow as many as twenty distinct sounds a second; we notice sounds that fade into nothingness in a few thousandths of a second; and we do so while turning this complicated acoustic input into electrochemical nerve impulses that the brain can process. The most complicated sound patterns a poet ever uses are as nothing compared to the patterns we handle habitually.

Vowels are in a way like musical notes; we can set up a vowel scale (rather like a musical scale) based on the frequencies that the sounds have in themselves. Sound, as we know, travels in waves. Since it travels at constant speed, the shorter the waves, the more per second—the higher, that is, the frequency of the sound. Shortwave sounds are high-frequency sounds, shrill sounds, like the *ee* of "whee!" The longer the waves, the fewer per second, and the slower and deeper the sound seems to be. (We know that if an old 78 rpm record is slowed down to the 33⅓ (LP) speed, the sound will get slower and deeper.) The *oo* of "moon" is a low-frequency sound.

A difficulty we run into in making up a vowel scale is that vowels are not notes, but chords made up of tones and overtones from the resonating system of throat, mouth, and head. Some of our fifteen sounds, the diphthongs, are two chords sounded in sequence. The *i* sound of "good-by" is a run-together *áh-ee*. Several other sounds are also vowels in motion—"glides" from one sound into another. Our scale, though it would not provide a basis for laboratory experiment, is on the whole accurate for American speech, and it serves well enough for the reading of poetry.

The "upness" and "downness" of vowel sounds affect us physically in different ways. The *ee* sound, at the top of the scale, comes in a pattern of waves that could be diagramed like this:



in contrast to the wave pattern of the *oo* sound, at the bottom of the scale:

The high-frequency *ee* is busier, gives the ear more to process. Its greater activity suggests greater vitality, speed, excitement than the slower-moving, more sluggish waves of the *oo*.

Few categories in our experience are richer in emotional suggestion than upness and downness. We associate being "up" or "high" with an increase in vitality, being "down" or "low" with a lessening of it. Our heart "sinks" when we feel grief, the physical effect of which Charles Darwin describes as follows: "The muscles [become] flaccid; the eyelids droop; the head hangs on the contracted chest; the lips, cheeks, and lower jaw all sink downward from their own weight."* The last phrase explains why downness is bad: When we give up or lose strength, gravitation takes over. All growth, aspiration, striving is an upward thing, almost against the nature of matter itself.

*Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 167.

High-frequency vowels go well with expressions of excitement, exhilaration, vivacity. James Joyce, one of the most sound-conscious of writers, provides a good example of their use in an exultant passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:*

> He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the seaharvest of shells and tangle and veiled grey sunlight and gayclad lightclad figures, of children and girls and voices childish and girlish in the air.

Probably no poet has ever so deliberately written in the high-frequency range as Dylan Thomas did when he urged his dying father to keep up his courage to the end.

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

DYLAN THOMAS (1914–1953)

The rhyming sounds, throughout, are $\bar{\imath}$ ("night") and $\bar{a}$ ("day"). With these are many high, bright $\bar{e}$'s ("deed"). The effect is not only in the high-frequency vowels themselves, but in the fact that they occur about twice as often here as they do in the normal run of English speech. The unlooked-for percentage must come as a shock of excitement, an aural pick-me-up, to the sensitive, if largely subconscious, mechanisms of the brain.

A more somber poem gives a very different concentration of sound.

Once by the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken.

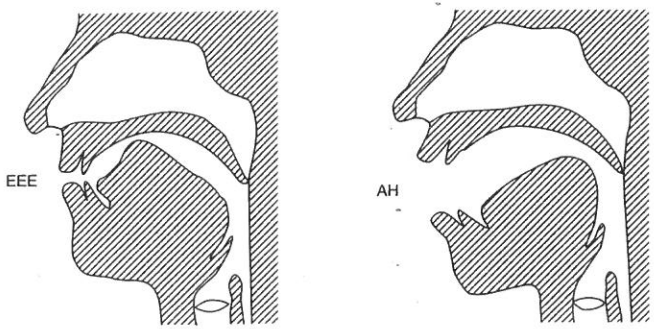
ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

A scary poem. Something in the universe, it implies, is threatening our existence; things are going to get worse before they get better. The vowel sounds gravitate toward the lower, darker notes: There are more than twice as many *aw*'s, *oo*'s, and *o*'s as we are used to hearing in spoken English.

The larger an object is and the more volume it has, the more slowly it is likely to vibrate. The long strings in a piano give us the deep tones; a double bass can go lower than a violin. Avalanches and stormy seas have deeper reverberations than hailstones on the roof—not merely louder. The larger object produces a low-frequency sound.

Since low notes are related to largeness, they also evoke what is powerful or awesome or ominous or gloomy. We think of them as *dark* notes, perhaps because our experience of caverns and other reverberating hollows is associated with the dark. (The voice of the great singer Caruso was said to "darken" as over the years it shifted from tenor toward baritone.)

Vowels have their characteristic resonance from the shape and size of the cavities in which they resound—that is, from the way in which we make use of the resonating chambers of mouth and head. The larger the hollow in which a vowel sound vibrates, the deeper the sound and the more clearly our nerves and muscles tell us that *we ourselves* are embodying largeness, hollowness, darkness. If we could see—which heaven forbid!—a cross section of the head of a person pronouncing "*ee,*" it would look rather like the left-hand figure below. The front part of the tongue has been raised to permit only a narrow stream of air to pass through. Such a high front vowel, tensely produced, can suggest not only speed, brightness, and vitality but also littleness, as in "needle" or "teeny-weeny." It *is* a littleness, and we are doing a kind of charade of littleness by squeezing the mouth to the narrowest opening that permits any sound at all.



People producing an *ah* sound (right hand figure, above) have to make the mouth a noticeably larger resonating chamber: have to make a sensitive part of the body, very close to the brain, a more sonorous cavern for the deeper, more solemn, more awesome sound. Not only do the sounds we produce have certain qualities, but our bodies, in producing them, are trying to be *like* those very qualities.

Sounds also affect us through the memories they arouse of what we have heard in life. The 10 billion neurons of the brain have almost infinite interconnections. Hearing certain sounds cannot fail to remind us of surf or thunder or the hiss of a snake or the whine of the winter wind through telephone wires on the prairie. Or of feet echoing in an empty street at night, the scream of brakes, the siren of a fire truck. Sounds like these can be deeply emotional, bringing, as we have learned, their messages of life and death.

For many reasons, then, the sounds of human speech are charged with emotional potential. Poets have always felt this. When Shelley begins his "Ode to a Skylark" with a line that features the four highest-frequency vowels, he sets the poem in the key of these vowels:

> Hail to thee, blithe spirit!

When Frost uses almost all of the bass vowels in the first two lines of "An Old Man's Winter Night," his introductory chords prepare us to expect the worst:

> All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him
> Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars. . . .

Once we have uttered a sound, we take pleasure in repeating it. We find repetition in magic spells, in solemn oaths, in orations, in ads, as well as in the speech noises a baby makes for its own pleasure. When a sound is clearly struck in a poem, it tends to attract similar sounds. At the beginning of Gary Snyder's "Oil," many of the sounds that we hear can be heard again within the next few syllables:

> soft rainsqualls on the swells
> south of the Bonins, late at night. Light
> from the empty mess-hall
> throws back bulky shadows
> of winch and fairlead
> over the slanting fantail where I stand. . . .

Repetition of a vowel sound ("soft"/"squalls"; "rain"/"late") is known as **assonance.**

Each of the fifteen vowel sounds of our scale has its own character or tone color. Skillful writers and sensitive readers are aware of the differences, just as one is aware of the differences between the tones of a flute, a violin, and a bassoon. But since poets for the most part work with the language as it is, and since words that combine a desired sound and an appropriate meaning are not always available, the use of expressive sound in poetry is not to be expected as a regular thing. The most we can say is that poets are sensitive to the sounds they are making and use them expressively when they see the opportunity. The benefit that most of us, as readers, derive from meditating at least briefly on the quality of individual sounds is that we come to participate more completely, more physically, in the experience of the poem. The remarks that follow—we repeat—should be tested in the mouth.

Writers or readers who wanted to master the keyboard of sound could concentrate on each of the fifteen vowel sounds in turn, noticing what happens in their mouth when they pronounce it, listening to its quality and deciding on its emotional possibilities, thinking of words in which it seems especially expressive, and watching for it to turn up in the poetry they are reading. They would not be surprised to discover that, just as such symbols as "earth" and "sea" have room at the same time for opposite connotations, so one sound can be appropriate for opposite emotions—the shrill *i* of "strike" can serve for either exultation or despair. Sounding this diphthong, they would feel how it originates as an *ah* in the lax back region of the throat but climbs instantly into the vibrant *ee* region. They could feel it move in their mouth. They might guess that since more energy goes into its production than into that of a pure vowel, it has more energy to convey. They might well decide that it is the most dynamic of the high-frequency vowels, that it strikes the ear more forcibly than the others, has more audibility. They might come upon Sylvia Plath using it almost brutally for its cutting power in

> Christ! they are panes of ice,
> A vice of knives . . .

or upon James Tate dramatizing its shrillness in

> . . . sirens malign
> the sky . . .

or upon Coleridge using its brightness and sparkle in

> . . . in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet moon.

We could work through all the vowel sounds in this way—though we do not have the time or space to do so here. Suppose we pick out only a few for examination.

Even the dullest vowel sound has its individuality. The little *i* (of "bit") has been a favorite with writers trying to depict things that are brisk, quick, little, slim, glittery. Plato thought it especially apt for showing movement. Many would feel that "skinny-dipping" sounds more like what it means than "nude bathing" does. The effect is in the thin, glittery vowels. "Shivery hickory" sounds right for a baseball bat. Robert Fitzgerald uses it in his well-known baseball poem ("Cobb Would Have Caught It," Anthology, p. 471), which has other quick-moving *i* sequences as well:

> . . . the baseman
> Gathers a grounder in fat green grass,
> Picks it stinging and clipped as wit
> Into the leather: a swinging step
> Wings it deadeye down to first. . . .

It is easy to find other examples of expressive *i*'s:

> Slim pickerel glint
> in the water. . . .
>
> DONALD HALL

> [a bird] flits nimble-winged in thickets. . . .
>
> SYLVIA PLATH

The short *ŭ* sound has a definite but disreputable personality. It has been called the "shudder vowel"—the *uh* or *ugh* we make when feeling horror or disgust. Pronouncing it is like clearing the throat or ejecting something from the mouth. The slang word "upchuck" (for *vomit*) has the appropriate sound. (Slang is frequently more sound-conscious than standard English.) An investigation of hundreds of monosyllables has shown that the *ŭ* of "mud" has generally undesirable connotations. One scholar has listed many *uh* words that express dislike, disgust, or scorn: "blunder," "bungle," "clumsy," "humdrum," "slum," "slush," "muck," "muddle," "slut." We could all think of others: "dump," "crummy," "sludge," "chump," "bunk," "punk," "runt," "pus," "muss," "fuzz," "puffy," "repugnant."

When we sort of push a grunt up, with tongue, cheek, and lips left slack, what comes out is an "*uh.*" We use it as the hesitation sound, when we don't quite know, uh, what to say. The archaic word "ugsome" meant *repulsive.*

Any observation we make about sound and sense will have *many* exceptions. These in no way disprove the expressiveness of sound; they merely show that in some words that particular element is inert or subordinate to other considerations. We can think of pleasant *uh* words: "young love," "summer," "cuddle," "comfort," "slumber," "lullaby," "yummy."

Man saying "Ugh!"

E. E. Cummings has combined the pleasant-unpleasant associations of *ŭ* and its slushy sound in his poem about the "mud-luscious," "puddle-wonderful" world of children.

Chansons Innocentes, I

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee
and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing
from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
its
spring
and
the
goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

The seven low-frequency vowel sounds, resonated from the back of the mouth, owe their deeper tone to the larger volume of air set in motion. To many, *aw* will seem the most powerful of the vowel sounds, a hollow reverberation from far back in the throat, rougher, grander, larger than the even lower-frequency *oh* and *oo* sounds. John Milton's "Lycidas" (Anthology, p. 381) opens impressively with a string of three stressed *aw*'s:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more. . . .

There are a half-dozen in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost:*

. . . that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us. . . .

One of Yeats' most sonorous lines is built on *aw:*

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

The vowel sound of lowest frequency is the *oo* of "moon." Because the lips are more rounded than for *oh* and the tongue a bit higher, *oo* picks up a flutelike quality from the narrower aperture. It sounds smoother, less hollow than the other deep tones. Helped by *b* and *m* it can indeed go "boo!" or "boom!" But *oo* can also have an eerie crooning quality. Better than any description is the range of emotions for which Plath uses it in the love-hate poem, all cooing and hooting, she wrote to the Teutonic "daddy" she felt had abandoned her by dying in her childhood. Of its eighty lines, over half end in *oo,* with such stanzas as:

I have always been scared of *you,*
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—. . . .
Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do. . . .

CONSONANTS

Vowels are produced by an unimpeded flow of breath. How expressive they can be in themselves we can see in Margaret Benbow's use of them in "Crazy Arms: Earlene Remembers" (Anthology, p. 540), in which the familiar vowels, *a e i o u,* by themselves turn into the impassioned cries of overlûsty lovers. Consonants are produced by interference that sets up an audible turbulence or cuts off the airflow completely. It might seem that the fewer consonants we use, the more musical our speech would be. But consonant power is one of the glories of English. Hawaiian, by contrast, has a high percentage of vowels and cannot pronounce two consonants together—"Merry Christmas" comes out "Mele Kalikimaka." It is the consonants that give shape and energy to our speech. Richard Wilbur has this in mind in his poem on Saint Teresa of Avila, who had to

lock the O of ecstasy within
The tempered consonants of discipline.

Robert Pinsky too has found them rugged. Of children learning a new language he writes:

We took their language into our mouths and chewed
(Some of the consonants drove us nearly crazy . . .)

Like vowels, consonants have their distinctive characters, which are felt more emphatically in repetition. Such repetition at the beginning of words or syllables is called **alliteration.**

The most vowel-like of the consonants are *w* and *y. W* is double *U*—an *oo* sound. When we read "Western Wind," we begin "*oo-estern oo-ind, hoo-en oo-ill* . . . ," with the *oo*'s gliding so rapidly into the following vowel that we are hardly aware of their "*oo*ness" at all. Vowel-like *w*'s alliterate smoothly:

O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer through the woods. . . .

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

It is a red bird that seeks out his choir
Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing. . . .

WALLACE STEVENS

It may be that the two *w*'s help account for the popularity of the western wind among poets.

In the opinion of many, the common American *r* is more vowel than consonant. Except for custom, "bird" could just as well be spelled "brd." But since *r* has a dark throaty quality—especially when combined with a guttural like *g*—we use it to represent the growl or *grrrr* of an animal or angry man. Ben Jonson was not the first to call it the dog's letter. François Villon put his French *r* (then rolled) to amusing use when he wrote a ballade (p. 313) to a lady he was angry at; for twenty-eight lines his rhymes, all ending in *r,* snarl and snap at her.

The *r* and *l* are both called *liquids.* They seem to flow on or around the tongue instead of being clicked or popped or hissed forth. Probably *l* would win a popularity contest for the prettiest vowel sound. Lord Byron makes fun of the overuse of soft *l*'s:

When amatory poets sing their loves
In liquid lines mellifluously bland. . . .

He would probably not have objected to the less conspicuous *l*'s with which Yeats' old woman wonders:

What lively lad most pleasured me
Of all that with me lay?

Down-to-earth theorists have noticed that the sound seems to be formed low in the mouth, near the surface of the tongue and the inner surface of the lower teeth, which are more bathed in saliva than other parts of the mouth. Saliva-bathed or not, *l* does go well with liquidity:

And on a sudden, lo! the level lake
And the long glories of the winter moon.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore. . . .

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

The *m, n,* and *ng* sounds are known as *nasals;* the airflow is diverted into the nasal passages to vibrate there. We can feel the change in our mouth by sounding the three in sequence: "bam," "ban," "bang."

We use an *m* sound—sometimes conventionalized as "yum!"—for warm appreciation. Probably no other consonant is so expressive by itself. In reply to "Do you like my dress?" a perfectly intelligible answer would be

"Mmmmmmmm!" The sound is prolonged, not broken off; is internal (behind closed lips) and hence warm and cherished; is associated with the affectionate and sensitive lips, which bring the human child the first pleasure it knows—food and the warm presence of its mother. It has been noticed that *m* occurs in the word for *mother* in many languages, presumably because this is the sound happy babies make. Because it is about the only sound we can make with closed lips, we hum it when engaged in such pleasurable activities as eating something or kissing someone.

The sound of *n* is somewhat higher in tone, more a whine than a hum; *n* seems to pick up a bony hardness from being sounded near the roof of the mouth. We might think of mosquitoes as going "*Nnnnnn,*" but not "*Mmmmmm.*"

The *ng* sound has a metallic resonance that qualifies it for many sound words: "bang," "boing," "bong," "clang," "ding-dong," "gong," "jangle," "ping," "ring."

The seven sounds we have so far discussed have been called semi-vowels; they would probably be thought of as the most musical of the consonants.

The sounds known as *fricatives* are produced by audible friction over something that interferes with the airflow from the lungs. They include *h; f, c; th* ("thing"), *dh* ("that"); *s, z; sh, zh* ("pleasure"). The *h* is only a roughness in the breath, the rasp of air through the vocal cords as they get in place for the vowel that follows.

In *f* and *v,* turbulence is heard as the air passes between the lower lip and the upper teeth. Both sounds can be pleasantly soft, though they are not necessarily so.

Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well. . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past. . . .

ROBERT FROST

When the breath hisses between tongue and teeth, the result is an *s* sound. Jonson spoke of it with mixed feelings: "a most easy and gentle letter, and softly hisseth against the teeth . . . it is called the serpent's letter." Ancient critics looked down on it as "more suited to a brute beast than to a rational being." Tennyson tried to get rid of *s*'s; he called it "kicking the geese out of the boat." Robert Graves says his deathbed advice will be: "The art of poetry consists in knowing exactly how to manipulate the letter S." Graves finds Shelley particularly crude in his handling of *s* sounds, as in these lines from "Ode to the West Wind":

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed. . . .

. . . when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision. . . .

In processing sound tracks for recordings, technicians make use of a device called a *de-esser* to get rid of the hiss. Writers, however, sometimes make their lines hiss on purpose. One famous example is the conspiratorial whisper of Macbeth:

. . . if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence and catch,
With his surcease, success. . . .

Many of the sounds we have been considering can change their character in the company of other sounds. The *sn* and *st* might be taken as typical.

Of the words that start with *sn,* only a few are pleasant: "snow," "snuggle," "snug," and some others. Most are unpleasant: "snag," "snare," "snake," "sneak," "snide," "snitch," "snob," "snoop," "snub." One large group of *sn* words has to do with the nose: "sneeze," "sniff," "snuffle," "snivel," "snoot," "snore," "snort," "snout," "snuff," "sneer." Darwin thought that "sneer" and "snarl" were related, and that both were produced by muscular contractions like those of a snarling dog, with lip drawn back to expose the threatening canine tooth.

Many words beginning with *st* mean things that "stand steady" or are "stable" or "stabilized"; or that support something, like "staff," "stake," "stem," "stilt," "stirrup," "strut," "stud"; or that are somehow strong, like "stern," "stiff," "strict," "stubborn," "sturdy," "stag," "steed"; or that show energetic action, like "stalk," "stamp," "storm," "stun."

How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

THOMAS GRAY

And she who seemed eaten by cankering care
In statuesque sturdiness stalks. . . .

THOMAS HARDY

Robert Graves, often a skeptic in these matters, commends the muscular *str* words as being like what they mean: "strain," "strength," "strangle," "struggle," "strike," "strive," and many others.

Sh, sounded farther back in the mouth, is less sharp but has more body than *s*. We use it, as a kind of "white noise," to overpower other sounds when we say, "Shhhh!" or "Hush!"—whereas "Sssss!" is to get attention or express disapproval.

The final group of consonants—*p, b; t, d; k, g*—called *stops* (or *plosives* or *explosives*), are more drastic. They cut off the air for a moment, let pressure build up behind the barrier of lips or tongue, then release it with a tiny explosion. With *p* and *b,* the most forceful of the consonant sounds, it is the lips that block and explode the air. Repetitions of *p* call instant attention to themselves


Woman saying "Sn—!"

by sounding like the "Peter Piper picked . . ." tongue twister. The *b* can be almost as obstreperous. When Shakespeare wants to make fun of excessive alliteration (consonant repetition), *b* is the letter he chooses for his ridicule:

Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast. . . .

Plath uses *p* and *b* for the texture of rocky soil:

What flinty pebbles the ploughblade upturns. . . .

Other contemporaries have used these stops for abrupt physical motion:

The lobbed ball plops, then dribbles in the cup. . . .

ROBERT LOWELL

Plop, plop. The lobster toppled in the pot. . . .

JOHN BERRYMAN

Robert Browning put the exuberance of *b* to good use in describing the buxom abundance of a woman's body:

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red,—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head?

A *p* (and a *b* almost as well) can express rejection by holding back the air and then violently expelling it, as in "Pooh!" or "Bunk!" Comic strips use the spit sound "*Ptui!*" for disgust. (The classical Greek word for "spit" was almost the same—*ptuo.*) Such words originate, it seems, in the natural mouth movements of the act of spitting. When we pronounce *p* or *sp,* the muscles of the mouth mimic disgust—which means that, if disgust happens to be what we feel, we can throw ourselves more completely, with more body English, into what we are saying.

When we pronounce *t* or *d,* the air is stopped by the tongue tip, which is clicked against the ridge behind the teeth. The effect is neater, trimmer than with the more explosive *p* and *b;* clocks and watches show a sense of fitness in saying "ticktock" instead of "bing bang."

When we pronounce *k* or *g* (a hard *g,* as in "guttural," not as in "gesture"), the airflow is stopped farther back toward the throat by the bunched-up back of the tongue. Particularly when reinforced with *r* or the deeper vowels, these give us the most throaty sound available—as in "choke," "crow," "gag," "gargle."

> Crows crowd croaking overhead. . .
>
> JOHN CLARE

> Not only sands and gravels
> Were once more on their travels,
> But gulping muddy gallons
> Great boulders off their balance
> Bumped heads together dully
> And started down the gully. . . .
>
> ROBERT FROST

Alliteration is as old as language. Babies alliterate before they can speak a sentence: "da-da," "bye-bye." We all know what alliteration can do for a slogan or catch phrase. Political sloganeers revel in it. Alliterative phrases have entwined themselves into the language we use every day. One could find hundreds of examples like "house and home," "rack and ruin," "spick and span," "rough and ready," "a dime a dozen," "in the fourth and final quarter." Driving into Tennessee from the north, one passes a restaurant–gas station called "Tank 'n' Tummy," among fireworks dealers known as "Goofy Goober," "Lonely Luke," "Crazy Chris," and—with assonance—"Loco Joe." Somebody believes in sound values!

Alliteration can, like any useful thing, be vulgarized by overuse. Politicians and advertisers are probably the most flagrant offenders. But poets have also been at fault. Edmund Spenser, coming on the line

> For lofty love doth loathe a lowly eye . . .

objected to this "playing with the letter." Good alliteration, however, is much more than a literary gewgaw. It can create a bond of identity between words, hinting that if they have a sound in common, perhaps they have something more:

> Love me little, love me long,
> Is the burden of my song.
>
> *Anonymous*

> Lay hands upon these traitors and their trash. . . .
>
> WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

It can also represent, by its muchness of sound, any kind of muchness:

> Great England's glory and the world's wide wonder. . . .
>
> EDMUND SPENSER

> Before polygamy was made a sin;
> When man, on many, multiplied his kind,
> Ere one to one was cursedly confined. . . .
>
> JOHN DRYDEN

> Fish, flesh and fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, and dies. . . .
>
> WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

> *Flammantia moenia mundi,* Lucretius wrote,
> Alliterating like a Saxon—all those M's mean majesty. . . .
>
> ROBINSON JEFFERS

Or weary repetition:

> The plowman homeward plods his weary way. . . .
>
> THOMAS GRAY

It may link words together by sound only to contrast their meaning:

> The graceful with the gross combined,
> The stately with the stinking. . . .
>
> ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH

It may be a mark of abundant energy:

> To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone. . . .
>
> WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Clinging alliteration can stand for clinging things:

> Nor cast one longing lingering look behind . . .
>
> THOMAS GRAY

> . . . the stale
> steak grease stuck to her fuzzy leaves. . . .
>
> THEODORE ROETHKE

In writing about the bewildering death of a little girl (p. 106), John Crowe Ransom uses stiff alliteration for two kinds of immobility:

> In one house we are sternly stopped
> To say we are vexed at her brown study,
> Lying so primly propped.

Assonance (p. 159) can serve the same purposes as alliteration, though often more subtly.

EXERCISES & DIVERSIONS

A. About such matters as we have been discussing in this chapter, the Roman critic Quintilian once wrote: "Studies of this kind harm only those who stick in them, not those who pass through them." Explore the implications of this remark, particularly in regard to our treatment of sound.

B. 1. *Whisper* the words "June," "Joan," "John," "Jan," "Jen," "Gin," "Jane," "Jean," in that order. Can you feel how the vowel sounds move progressively up the scale? Now *whisper* them in reverse order. Can you feel them move down the scale?
2. What do you notice about the use of sound in Pound's "Alba" (p. 12)?
3. Shakespeare's "Sonnet 129" (Anthology, p. 373) was referred to earlier as a poem of disgust or revulsion. The poem is full of expressively ugly sounds. Point them out.

C. In each of the following lines of poetry, some sound effect is conspicuous. Decide, with each, if it is too conspicuous. Or are the sounds appropriate and expressive?

1. Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

2. I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room. . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

3. But let determined things to destiny
Hold unbewailed their way. . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

4. Oh for that night! When I in Him
Might live invisible and dim.

HENRY VAUGHAN

5. I saw, alas! some dread event impend. . . .

ALEXANDER POPE

6. The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

7. From the sails the dew did drip. . . .

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

8. Over the water the old ghost strode. . . .

THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES

9. Up many and many a marvellous shrine
Whose wreathèd friezes intertwine
The viol, the violet, and the vine. . . .

EDGAR ALLAN POE

10. Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad. . . .

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

11. Like some black mountain glooming huge aloof. . . .

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

12. A vacant sameness grays the sky. . . .

THOMAS HARDY

13. The mother looked him up and down,
And laughed—a scant laugh with a rattle.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

14. Some morning from the boulder-broken beach. . . .

ROBERT FROST

15. One hears the rustled stirring of a bell:
A small bell faintly clinked,
Sleepy and indistinct:
Or a deep bell which the winds forlornly toll. . . .

CONRAD AIKEN

16. Tossed
by the muscular sea,
we are lost,
and glad to be lost
in troughs of rough
love.

MAY SWENSON

17. . . . salt flats,
Gas tanks, factory stacks, that landscape. . . .

SYLVIA PLATH

18. . . . Then back to housework,
we hunched over our ironing or bunched
in froggy squats beside our soapy buckets,
backs buckling, all elbows and buttocks.

JULIA ALVAREZ

D. 1. Think of ten common alliterating phrases like "might and main," "friend or foe," "sink or swim."

2. We discussed words beginning with *sn* and *st*. Do you find any pattern in words beginning with *bl* and *br?* (Recall words you know, like "blare" and "brisk," or skim a dictionary.)

E. Write a short poem or paragraph on an "up" theme, using many high-frequency vowels. Do the same with a "down" theme, using many low-frequency vowels.

(You might also enjoy reversing the process to see what happens: Write on an "up" theme using "down" vowels, and vice versa.)

ESSAY

In 1655 Milton wrote one of his greatest sonnets to protest an atrocity of the time, the slaughter in the mountains of more than a thousand members of the Vaudois by the Duke of Savoy. How is sound used expressively? (Notice that sounds at the end of lines are especially prominent—even more so when they happen to rhyme.)

On the Late Massacre in Piedmont

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,
Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our fathers worshiped stocks and stones
Forget not: in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To Heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all th' Italian fields where still doth sway
The triple tyrant: that from these may grow
A hundredfold, who having learnt thy way
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

JOHN MILTON (1608–1674)

Write an essay in which you paraphrase the poem; then offer a thesis about Milton's expressive use of sound. In the body of the paper, discuss this usage in detail, using plenty of quoted examples. For a conclusion, don't merely reiterate your opening; instead, ask yourself why contemporary readers might care about such expressive sound, and try to write a defense of this aspect of poetry. As an alternative, try this essay assignment with a poem by Richard Wilbur or another contemporary poet.

8

WORKING WITH GOLD

The Devices of Sound

LANGUAGE AS MIMICRY

Poetry used to be magic. Far away and long ago, among people simpler than most of us, poetic formulas, perhaps in rhyme or some other form of sound-play, were thought to bring rain or put a curse on an enemy or charm someone into loving. In all such spells, as we recall from fairy tales, the sound was as important as the sense. Origen, the third-century theologian from Egypt who wrote in Greek, mentions certain charms found useful in ridding one's house of devils; he cautions, however, that they will not work in translation. Not because devils are poor linguists, but because the power of the formula lay in the sound itself. The aspects of language we will be concerned with in this chapter may seem more a matter of magic than of science.

Some 15,000 years ago, when the glaciers of the last Ice Age drove our ancestors into cave openings near the Mediterranean, reindeer, natives of the Arctic tundra, roamed freely over what are now the resort areas of the Riviera. Earth dwellers had been human for hundreds of thousands of years before the Ice Age, but they come before us with particular vividness when we see the cave drawings made in those centuries. These exist for us in a soundless world. "Many of the painted caves are really very terrifying places; the silence is intense, broken only occasionally by a distant boom when a drop of water falls from the roof into some silent pool below."* But the artist did not live in a world of silence. Ice and gravel crackled underfoot; thunder roared and re-echoed; animals made the same cries and growls that animals make today.

*M. Burkitt, *The Old Stone Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p. 216.