**Writing and Rhythm : Call and Response**

Anna Tsing and Paulla Ebron

Anna Tsing and Paulla Ebron (in shaded sections) talk of the rhythms of motion and time that give life to their writing.

Writing needs rhythm.  It comes from the play of private and shared: the rhythm of the body, of the ear, and of thought; the rhythm of talk, of texts, and of tales. Even just pondering, "How do I write?," brings me into my self, and into close talk. Thinking gains rhythm from words passed by others. We listen for the back and forth of those beats. Talk to me first, then, about tempo. Through what rhythms does writing emerge?

***4 a.m. The darkness of early morning makes it possible to think.  The silence is so loud; it becomes its own distraction. It is a distraction that helps one think.  Think. There's not much else to do. To Do. . . . The blue lab book, open to the numbered page 56: thin blue lines on a faint green page. Find the ink. Fill the pen. Note the time.  Write. Write. Argh!  Thoughts come slow. I must write to page 59. This is the daily ritual. But I’ve nothing. . . nothing to say. Write. I listen to the scratch of the nib on paper. Write. I hear the sound of the strokes of letters. Scratch.  I feel the words under my hand. Words. Words.  A paragraph! Another. I’m no longer slow or stuck; the pace picks up. The sound of the pen's work fades. A page ends. 4:26 a.m.***

***Rituals: Anthropologists know them. We learn not just the monotony of habitual practice but also the way that repetition can transform us. Sitting down to write in the early morning is my way of coming to consciousness. Before anything reaches out from the day’s duties to draw my attention away, I come to myself slowly, gradually reconnecting with the point I left the day before. In this empty time I find the trace of earlier thoughts. Or is it a new start?***

***Free writing is a way to work through the tangle of competing thoughts.  Where to start: that nagging question. Sigh... Dorothea Brande's Becoming a Writer (1934)(1) offers advice: Write every day, first thing.***

The time of day is less insistent for me than the motion of writing.  My rhythm of writing is the rhythm of walking.  Trapped in a chair, my mind shuts down.  Moving my legs, thoughts start to flow.  Swept out of their corners by the flow of my blood, words come into focus, and stories unfold.

One scholar told me, "A stroll in the city *is* my research."  One artist wrote, "Napping is essential to my art."  We each need to find the rhythms that move us.  For me, it is walking.  In a pinch, I will pace, but better the air and the smell of plants.  There my thoughts breathe.  Often they race into irrelevant daydreams.  Yet even those fantasies, useless and unbidden, remind me of rhythms I have yet to explore.

Colleagues always ask each other, "How can you tell when your writing is right?"  For me it is rhythms; I can hear the song.  Of course, there are many possible songs. And surely one can write with grace but no meaning.  But scholars find it easier to find the point than the music, yet we need the music to make the point.  Even for oneself: I listen for the song to consolidate the point.  A point needs a song.  And the singing requires the work of the body-for me, in walking.

***Even while sitting down to write in silence, my words move to music. I am hearing a mental performance of Anouar Brahem' s "Le pas du chat noir." (2) In a sense, it’s like walking. The oud, accordion, and piano resonate in my mind. My words pick up the rhythm, creating an interior sound scape. Moving: the repetition of the piano. Write words. Write words. Write words. One. Two. three.  One, two, three. One, two, three. I hang my words on the sounds.***

***I finish a written passage. Brahem gives way to the words read aloud. I must hear how these words sound and play together.  Here are my measures of musical score.  What do I hear? How does this passage resound? Words resonate as much as the oud.  I listen again. Language is spoken. It’s alive, not flat. Read, read aloud! Aristotle notes the importance of rhetoric: the spoken life of words. Words persuade through their sounds as well as their meanings. I read a passage over and over. After several times, I am inside my text; I hear the same words differently.  They transform in their spoken state, they’re given life beyond the page. Even to understand someone else’s text, I listen, and listen again. Finally I begin to hear, to understand. Repetition changes things, as Derrida suggests. Repetition is good in reading and writing. Over again. Substitute a word. Okay. Start at the beginning. Listen first in one’s own voice, the practice chamber in the mind. Then give the words a new life: Speak aloud. Read it again. Listen to other voices. Speak!  It sounds right. Listen!***

I agree. Whether we notice or not, our words have rhythms in them.  We might as well enjoy them.  Anglo-Saxon sounds still stab and spark; thus the monster Grendel's work in Seamus Heaney's admirable *Beowolf*: "greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men/ from their resting places and rushed to his lair,/ flushed up and inflamed from his raid/ blundering back with the butchered corpses" (ll. 122-125).(3)

For those who don't like *Beowolf*, think of hip hop: What makes it work is the musicality of words.  Alliteration and sonority are not just for poetry.  Short words are tools for making writing punch.

For a while, scholarly criticism was defined by the critic's ability to interrupt the flow of ordinary language by prose so hard to read that it forced us to slow down and rethink common sense.  I appreciate this.  But it makes no sense to complicate our writing just to show our erudition.  Instead, why not make language work for us?

Whether we notice or not, our words have rhythms in them.

***Music brings us out of ourselves, into ensemble. Outside of the interior cage, we play with others and for others. Our sounds call and respond. Written prose is one fragment of the score of the music performed by every reader.***

**References**

(1) Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1934

(2) Anouar Brahem, "Le pas du chat noir." ECM Records. 2002.

(3) Seamus Heaney, *Beowolf: A New Verse Translation*, W. W. Norton, 2000, p. 11.

***Anna Tsing and Paulla Ebron****(shaded blue) have written and thought together in a number of essays, including "In Dialogue: Reading Across Minority Discourses" in Women Writing Culture, R. Behar and D. Gordon, eds. (University of California, 1996). In their discussions about graduate mentoring, one theme has stood out: the need to take writing seriously. Tsing-working in a state university-worries about the pressure on young scholars to prove themselves by posing with trendy topics and writing incomprehensibly. They need more faith, she thinks, in their own research. Ebron-at a private university-urges young scholars to speak in closer dialogue with other thinkers, rather than assuming that their data speaks for itself. They should be wary of presumption. While their teaching sites have pushed them in different directions, they come together in the importance of dialogue itself as a stimulus to reading, analysis, and writing. Rhythm is just one part. Anna Tsing (University of California, Santa Cruz) is the author of Friction: an ethnography of global connection (Princeton, 2005) and In the realm of the diamond queen (Princeton, 1995). She is currently writing a book about global cultural and biological diversity seen through the perspective of the commerce and science surrounding matsutake mushrooms. Paulla Ebron (Stanford University) is the author of Performing Africa (Princeton, 2002). She is writing a book about the making of an American "Africa" in the Georgia Sea Islands through projects of public memory, landscape making, and political mobilization. The authors thank Hannah Appel and Jesse Davie-Kessler for their comments on an earlier draft.*