Chapter 4

Sentence Rhythm as Verbal Music

> You become a good writer just as you become a good joiner:
> by planning down your sentences (Colongne-Brookes 95).
>
> Anatole France

When considering each word in a sentence as a unit of musical meter having a complete beat of its own, good writers will avoid composing a singsong by arranging their phrase construction in a way that it creates different kinds of beats, and hence develops a rhythm.

Nevertheless, such rhythmical organization of phrases is not always easy. Strict adherence to grammar, for instance, can construct sentences that are monotonously jingling. Or, excessive aggregation of subordinate details as in cumulative and convoluted sentences may disrupt the tunes and make the whole piece sound obtrusive.

This chapter offers an outline of awkward sounds and effective ones, and also, how to rearrange phrase construction for a pleasing succession of sounds.

4.1 Awkward Sounds

Awkward sounds can be largely divided into two types: repetitive sentence pattern and repetitive word sounds.

4.1.1 Repetitive Sentence Pattern

It is not uncommon that once a writer has engaged in developing a sentence with strict adherence to grammatical conventions, the sentence

construction in the writing may risk forming repetitive-soundings. Example 4.1.1.1 shows a passage with repetitive-sounding in grammatically correct sentences.

Example 4.1.1.1

> A local woman had a basket on her head. She walked down the road to her village. Lush sheltering trees towered above her head. She stopped to smell the wild flowers along the way. Birds sat chirping in the tree limbs. Some squirrels scurried up and down the trees. The sun shone brightly. Her neck and hair thus started getting soaked with sweat.

In Example 4.1.1.1, a series of subject-and-verb sentences creates dull and monotonous soundings as the sentences are all about the same length, beginning with a subject then followed closely by a main verb.

REMARK 1: Do not confuse this repeated sentence pattern with segregating style, or a freight-train. Consider a good example below from "Total Eclipse" a work from a Pulitzer Prize-winning American writer Annie Dillard:

Example 4.1.1.2

> From all the hills came screams. A piece of sky beside the crescent sun was detaching. It was a loosened circle of evening sky, suddenly lighted from the back. It was an abrupt black body out of nowhere; it was a flat disk; it was almost over the sun. That is when there were screams. At once this disk of sky slid over the sun like a lid. The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. The hatch in the brain slammed. Abruptly it was dark night, on the land and in the sky. In the night sky was a tiny ring of light. The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world. (92-3)

Dillard uses here a series of segregated sentences—the sentence construction is short and simple—but, unlike previous example, the length varies and evidently, her passage does not create a predictable sentence pattern.

4.1.2 Repetitive Word Sounds

Identical and similar sounds of successive words, when inadvertently placed in a sentence can become obtrusive. Study the examples below.

Example 4.1.2.1

(a) I *walked* down the *walk*way, past the wooden stalls that sold savoury snacks.

(b) I **strode** down the walkway, past the wooden stalls that sold savoury snacks.

In (a), there is an exact rhyme "walk" (words in italic). Like a musical piece when two notes are sounded at the same time and they almost entirely unite, both words in the same way are positioned close enough to sound simultaneously and hence create a rough joint between them which, in this context, disturbs the whole mass of sounds (the passage).

The sentence in (b) avoids forming the dissonance of sounds by replacing the first repetitive sound with 'strode.'

To point out what combinations of sounds are good, and what displeasing, take a look at some examples of a deliberate repetition of sound below.

Example 4.1.2.2

> His *soul swooned slowly* as he heard the *snow falling faintly* through the universe and *faintly falling* like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead (53).

Example above presents a cadence of sounds in "The Dead" a work in a short story collection of an Irish novelist and poet James Joyce. Read it aloud and feel how strings of words beginning with the same letter sound and without the same spelling sequences.

Notice a good difference here: a pleasing blend of sound is also made up of well-defined timing.

4.2 Effective Sounds

Good writing is good speaking caught alive (Seidel 121).

Robert Frost

As effective sounds create good rhythm in timing and delivery, skilled writers then mix up their sentence lengths to start adding different notes into the piece in progress. Then, in the same way that notes sounded on a musical instrument have graphical symbols which tell the performer to take a breath or make a pause or even mark the end of a song, the writers also have their ways to add breaks or silences into the work—ways that can be roughly divided into two.

4.2.1 Well-defined Articulated Parts

As Frost compares a good piece of writing to good speaking, it is clear that very often if not all the time, people are initially taught to 'sound' the word as they read so wise writers then treat their work as a vocal sheet. Do keep in mind that for human sound production air is essential, and thus only with a healthy air supply can a human enunciate sounds and different notes; and hence when the piece being performed has many rapid notes in succession too fast for regular articulation, human will cast shorter notes to keep with the number of syllables needed to fit in one breath. An articulated part in a piece of writing, to put it simply, refers to the number of words said on one breath; and in the same way as in speech or sound production, well-defined articulated

parts in writing enable the whole piece to sing in harmony, melodious and pleasing.

Now, consider the examples below and study how each word is proportional in duration to other words in each breath unit. Note that as comma, semicolon and period are common symbols affecting articulation here, they are marked by a forward slash (/), a backslash (\) and a dash (--) to address a brief hold, a pause and an end of a chunk, respectively.

The first excerpt below is from "An Unofficial Rose" by Dame Murdoch, and then followed by "The Eyes of the Night" by Wang Meng.

Example 4.2.1.1

> Near to the foot of the hill arose the short spiky spears of a sweet chestnut plantation / and beyond it a little patch of woodland / where the wild cherry was but lately over / half veiled a group of conical oast houses in a blur of green—The village / hidden under the other spur of the hill / showed between luxuriant elms / golden-yellow now in the bright sun / only the slim upper part of the church spire—Beyond again was the far-receding level of the Marsh / its grassland / its willows / always a little paled and silvered—(Penhallurick 33)

Murdoch's passage above can be sliced into chunks of breath units: four chunks before the first ending, and within each of these, a brief hold marked by commas. What follows is a chunk of five clauses separated by commas, and then the second ending; and then another chunk of four clauses divided by commas, and the third ending.

Now, reread the whole passage again, and notice that though these three chunks share similar number of divisible parts (four, five and four), the number of words within each breath unit varies that it does not turn the whole

passage into a singsong. When finished, reread the passage by Wang Meng again. Notice how each chunk is divided by the breath units.

Example 4.2.1.2

> Big vehicles and small cars—Trolleys and bicycles—Honking / chatter / and laughter—*Only at night did this large city show off its energy and uniqueness—The scattered but attention-getting neon signs and the revolving poles in front of barber shops began to appear—There was permed hair and long hair—High heel shoes and low heel shoes / sleeveless frocks and dresses—The fragrance of toilet water and face cream—Cities and women were just beginning to pretty themselves up / but already there were people who wouldn't sit still for it*—This was interesting—Chen Gao had not been back to this city for more than twenty years— (Gibbs 44)

Here, Wang Meng breaks the passage into many small breath units: the first two chunks without a hold, followed by three successive holds before the third ending; then six successive longer chunks with varied length (text in italic) before he ends the description with shorter chunks: one, very short "This was very interesting" to denote a quick short pace, and the other, longer, "Chen Gao had not been back to this city for more than twenty years." Note that the rhythm here has meaning. Wang Meng connects many short chunks in the early part of the description to mimic the numerous disordered impressions toward the city in the character's mind, and after signaling the readers the shift of view by a short breath unit addressed in the "This was interesting," the writer uses a long chunk again as he steps out of the character's mind and resumes his narration.

Now, study how combination of articulated parts can create emphasis in the description. Example 4.2.1.3 presents "In a Country of Mothers" written by an American writer Amy Homes:

Example 4.2.1.3

> She turned on a lamp / checked her appointment book / sorted the magazines in the waiting room / refilled the Kleenex supply / plumped the pillows on her sofa / and then sat down in her chair / ready— (Bercovitch & Patell 339)

By putting a hold before a one-word chunk, Homes gives the weight on the final word "ready." In the same way, a scene in "The Red Badge of Courage" by another American writer Stephen Crane who also throws the weight upon the final word.

Example 4.2.1.4

> The cold passed reluctantly from the earth / and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills / resting—(1)

Crane emphasizes the above statement by adding a hold before the final word, followed by a one-word breath unit (resting). Notice that the fragment, when carefully placed (intentional fragment), can carry emphasis in the statement.

EXERCISE

Prompt 12: Dividing Breath Units

Instruction: Write about the most memorable trip you ever had.

Limitations: Detail the moment in the scene and vary sentence length. When finished, check the number of words said in one breath unit and make sure you create a symphony of sounds.

4.2.2 Rhythmic Break

Despite common symbols—comma, semicolon and period—used as an indication to hold or pause between sounds or words in writing, on occasions longer temporary stop is also desirable. Convoluted sentences, for example, insert obvious interrupting construction, most often between the subject and the verb.

Now, read aloud the examples below, from Virginia Woolf's Orlando. Hold a brief pause for common symbols and make a longer one where a dash is placed.

Example 4.2.2.1

> **He**—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—**was** in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters (Woolf 13).

Try again with the following example, "Sula" a novel written by Toni Morrison a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist.

Example 4.2.2.2

> It was a fine **cry**—loud and long—**but** it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow (174).

Note here the difference that in Example 4.2.2.1, Virginia Woolf presents here a long pause after the subject "He" and before the verb "was" whereas in Example 4.2.2.2, Morrison inserts a long pause after the first clause (It was a fine cry).

As presented here, the position of longer pause in a sentence can be freely varied, and thus indicates different position of emphasis. Woolf, for instance, emphasizes the words before and after the work so the readers are aware of the subordinate details in between while Morrison places the break

after the first clause to mark the modifier 'loud and long' placed after the noun 'cry,' so this subordinate detail is specially noticed.

EXERCISE

Prompt 13: Rendering a Break

Instruction: Rewrite the memorable trip in Prompt 12.

Limitations: This time, add into the moment a long break by an interrupting construction.

4.2.3 Repeating Key Words

Like a hook in a musical piece, or when a word or a lyrical phrase stands out, repeated word sounds make a strong and simple connection in writing by linking successive clauses or sentences together. Though less obvious than logical transition (i.e. first, second, third, next, then), they achieve flow more natural.

Ready Example 4.2.3.1, "A Tale of Two Cities" by an English novelist Charles Dickens.

Example 4.2.3.1

> It is a *far, far better* thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is *far, far better* rest that I go to than I have ever known (353).

The repeated sounds here work well; it leads the readers into the new chunk by occurring naturally at the end of the preceding one.

In another example, an American novelist Frank Norris repeats the sound "now" before beginning the chunk of breath unit:

Example 4.2.3.2

> McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, *now* at the distant horizon, *now* at the ground, *now* at the half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison (572).

Here, Norris guides the readers' perspective with the repeated "Now" sounds to connect the successive clauses together; the readers experience the scene in front of the character and their sight in the scene remains fixated until the next fixation is guided and made.

In the last example, Chief Letakots-Lesa emphasizes the idea that all things are actually divisible parts of two by inserting repeated words "two" here and there in the description.

Example 4.2.3.3

> All things in the world are *two*. In our minds we are *two*—good and evil. With our eyes we see *two* things that are ugly ...we have the right hand that strikes and makes for evil, and the left hand full of kindness, near the heart. One foot may lead us to an evil way, the other foot may lead to a good. So are all things two, all *two* (Curtis 98).

EXERCISE

Prompt 14: Linking Breath Units with Repeated Sounds

Instruction: Describe a scene at a busy train station.

Limitations: Add a repeated word sound into the scene; it can be a single word sound, or a phrase. Use it as a connective of successive clauses or sentences in the description.

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Create a line of at least 30 words using repeated word sounds.

SAMPLE

After years of struggling with insomnia, my mind is finally at ease when my desire is subsided, my distracting thought is subsided, my urge for revenge is subsided, and all intense nightmares, forever subsided.

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Chapter 5

EXERCISE

Instruction: In the space provided below, select one of the prompts given to write a free verse poem.

Prompts

1. Write a free verse poem using "sparrows".
2. Write a free verse poem using starting with prepositional phrase.
3. Write a free verse poem with a seasonal theme.
4. Write a free verse poem based on transitory things or a fleeting moment.
5. Write a free verse poem about a very small object or living thing.