The Soul of Creative Writing

Richard Goodman
The Soul of Creative Writing
Books by Richard Goodman

French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France
The Soul of Creative Writing
To Brenda Bowen and Mary Downs
Hearts of gold
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I have not included those eye-stopping numbers in the text to indicate the source for a quotation. The citations are in the Notes section at the end of the book, referenced by chapter and page number. While recognizing the need to cite my sources, I also want the experience for the reader to be as pleasurable as possible.

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Introduction

I think all creative writers realize at a certain point that language will be the one friend and ally that will never desert them. There is a moment when writers know they won’t be making the journey alone, that they will have a constant companion, and an astonishing one at that. Writers sit down at the desk with very little. It used to be a pen or pencil and some paper, or perhaps a typewriter. Now, many of us sit down to word processors. But, still, it’s the most meager of work stations when the writer sits down to face the humbling blank page. Except that each time he or she does, language is there, too. It’s the other welcome, steadfast companion in that silent room.

And what an ally it is. It’s not just steadfast, but agile, muscular, resourceful, subtle, untiring. It’s been fashioned by thousands of anonymous donors—men and women, scribes, rulers, soldiers, farmers, engineers, sailors, explorers, poets, bakers, preachers, hobos, weavers, singers, magicians—everyone and anyone who has ever grappled with expressing something and who has tried to articulate that concept or thing or action with, first, sounds and then, later, with written shapes.

Language is owned by no one. Language as it exists in the dictionary is a deep ocean of living words, as varied as undersea life, there for every one of us. Land can be owned—it can be sectioned, fenced off. Water can be owned—whole lakes, pretty and deep, are owned by individuals. Even the sky can be owned. In New York, and in other cities, “air rights,” the space above a building, are sold for millions of dollars. Language, though, can’t be owned. It can be corrupted, true, and it can be prostituted, and it can be regulated. But it cannot be owned. Each and every person in this country—and this is true of course with every language in every country—inherits the English language when he or she is born. It’s an enormous, complex, inexhaustible gift.

This book, then, is an expression of gratitude for that gift. Each of these chapters is an attempt to illuminate the depth and subtlety, the muscularity, the grace of our language. It is a homily to its qualities.
Writers love words the way a yachtsman loves boats, the way a carpenter loves wood. Writers love language. Writers cannot be smarter than language, however. They can never totally master it. Even the greatest fall short. As T.S. Eliot wrote in “East Coker,”

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l’entre deux guerres—
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Billy Collins writes about poetry being the “result of a negotiation between the poet and an essentially uncooperative language.” Faulkner spoke of The Sound and the Fury as his “best failure.” The language is uncooperative like the sea is. It cannot be tamed by one writer, it is not meant to be tamed by anyone. Honest writers understand this relationship with their language, and are humbled by it. As a sailor must be humbled by the immense, unlimited power of the sea. Our efforts are imperfect, as they must be. But the challenge is forever compelling, and interesting. Our language forever inspires us, with its depth and beauty, to try again.

This book was written after a lifetime of working and struggling with words, of coming into intimate contact with the English language. Every day and every year, I have become more impressed with the bounty of our tongue. I continue to be astonished at what other writers can and have done with the language. Reading is more or less a tour of a writer’s efforts at manipulating the language to create art, to create flesh and blood and mountains, cities, homes and gardens out of inky symbols on the page. The great pleasure of reading is experiencing how the most sensitive, inventive minds use language to create undiscovered countries, to create “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” as Marianne Moore described it. It’s the heart’s architecture fashioned by words, by language.

Why did I become a writer? I think I can trace the origins of the kind of writer I am to a few distinct sources. One of these is my mother. I didn’t realize this until the end of her life when we would talk on the phone, she
in Florida, I in New York. At one point my ear began to speak to me, to tell me, “How well she’s using words! How interestingly! Listen to the sentences she’s creating, how direct and precise they are. Listen to how she always chooses the right word.” I realized that as a boy, this respect for, and facility with, words she had must have seeped into my body as surely as the Virginia air I breathed. She was my pre-Muse, without my knowing it.

Then there was the church, the small, red brick Virginia Episcopal church I attended—reluctantly. Those words and phrases I heard in church from the King James Bible were not like any other I ever heard. Nobody I knew ever said to me, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.” Nobody informed me that words could be arranged like that, made to express sounds like that. Nobody ever expressed an idea like, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” But when I went to church, I heard this music, again and again. I didn’t always understand a lot of what I heard. When the preacher said that a house divided against itself cannot stand, I didn’t know what he meant, but my body responded to the music, and excited me somewhere between my heart and my soul.

Then there was the moment when as a boy of twelve I was reading Robinson Crusoe, and I saw Friday’s footprints in the sand. There was someone else on that island! You—Robinson Crusoe—won’t be alone anymore! I somehow knew after that words, mere words, could make me feel great emotions. Words written in a book by a man from another country and long dead could make my heart skip two beats. I learned that any book I picked up might do wonderful things. Somewhere inside me I wanted to possess that magic.

There were all these things, and more—libraries, teachers, an award or two, and even the dictionary. The dictionary. It was the key to the kingdom, the kingdom of words where I wanted to reside.

Ever since men and women began putting pen to paper, or bytes to screen, they have struggled with this untamable ocean that is our language. Writers have grappled with the same problems, with the same “general mess of imprecision of feeling,” T.S. Eliot spoke of, bemoaned the same shortcomings of theirs, achieved some well-earned victories and similar defeats in trying to describe, as Faulkner put it, “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” Faulkner spent a lifetime “in the agony and sweat of the human spirit,” wrestling with the great English language, just as all writers have, still do, and will do. Writers are linked
to the writers of the past, great and small, because of this. This is what we do. It is a privilege, both humbling and endlessly inspiring, to work daily, “trying to hit the head on the nail,” as John Berryman wrote, with this magnificence that is English.

This book is a testament to that struggle.
Part 1

Words
1

The Music of Prose

“Stories do not give instruction, they do not explain how to love a companion or how to find God. They offer, instead, patterns of sound and association, of event and image.” —Barry Lopez, About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory

Language is sound by which we communicate. You could say it’s organized sound. Or patterned sound. Or sound charged with meaning. But it’s still sound. You listen to me speak, and you’re listening to sound. But it’s variable sound. It’s sound with—pauses. With emphasis. With, well, you know, a certain rhythm.

In writing, the kind of sound the writer makes on the page is crucial to our liking his or her prose, or not. When we read prose, we hear it. As Eudora Welty wrote in One Writer’s Beginnings, “Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn’t hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me.” How prose writers are different is, among other things, the sound they make on the page. The sound of Raymond Carver on the page is very different from the sound Henry James makes on the page. A sentence is far more than information.

In another way of speaking about this, Jean Cocteau said he knew Shakespeare was a great writer, even without Cocteau’s knowing a single word of English. He could hear it in the sounds the words made.

At the highest level, the sound a writer makes on the page is music.

So you can say writing is music we can all read. Instead of clef notes, sharps and minors, full stops or half stops, and all the other symbols actual music employs, English has letters, syllables, and words. It has many methods by which to control the sounds it produces. Some of these methods are subtle and require great practice to use them expertly, like playing an instrument well requires dedicated practice. What order the words are placed in the sentence can determine what kind of sound, or
melody, emerges. However, that sentence will not stand alone and must be taken in context with other sentences, so its individual music may be sublimated to the larger melody of the paragraph. Punctuation is another determiner of what kind of sound the sentence makes and how it makes it. For example, I can. Make. You. Read. At. The. Pace. That. I. Want. You. To. Simply. By. This. Little. Dot.

In fact, the English language is an enormous musical instrument. It’s made up of words which are in turn made of syllables that are stressed or unstressed. So right there we have a basis for music—dissimilarity. It is this simple concept—stressed and unstressed syllables—that is at the heart of it all. The words, and stresses, are placed in combinations and orders that produce a kind of melody. Think of the famous opening to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: Dah dah dah dah. So much of the drama comes from the simple idea of the last note’s heavy stress. Despite what Molière had his bourgeois gentleman say, we actually speak quite often in poetry—in iambics, or in blank verse. Or in some version of stressed/unstressed syllabism. The music of prose has, in its own way, the variety, scope, shadings, colors, melodies, and drama of music that is played on instruments.

Why are we concerned with music in writing at all? Because we are musical. We are essentially musical, we humans. We are musical for the simple, profound reason that we have a heart. From the moment we’re born—no, actually, before we’re born—we have a steady, consistent, basic beat of our heart inside us: ba-bump ba-bump. Our blood surges and retreats, like a tide. So inside us we have an unstressed and stressed beat, the basis for music, a pulse. I believe that’s one reason why we respond to music and seek to create it. It comes naturally, by way of our own body.

The two main elements of prose are music and meaning. It’s a little artificial to talk about the music of prose without talking about meaning, as well. It’s a bit like talking about the melody of a song without its lyrics. That’s really half a song. In reality, the prose writer’s task is to balance the two, and that balance may be equal or unequal, depending on the desired effect and on the relationship with other words and sentences. Sometimes music takes a back seat to meaning, sometimes meaning has to move over for music. That’s one reason why a good writer has to have a good ear.

Cleanth Brooks asked Robert Frost about music in writing and its origins:
“Would you say that even though the meter is based on the human pulse or some kind of basic rhythm in our natures...it’s something to be fought with, to be tussled with? It’s not directly expressive—ta-DA, ta-DA, ta-DA, ta-DA, ta-DA.”

Frost replied, “No, it’s doggerel when you do that. You see, and how you save it from doggerel is having enough dramatic meaning in it for the other thing to break the doggerel.”

*Good* prose is musical. Like actual music, it can be lyrical, tender, and soft. It can be dissonant, harsh, blunt. It can be grand. It can be simple. It can be comic or tragic. It employs many of the same methods as actual music: rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, and balance. It can produce sounds that, at the highest level, have a unique melody. Take the beginning to Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Why is that sentence remembered by practically anyone who reads it? It’s not because of the content. It’s because of the *music*. Every fine writer produces a kind of music with his or her writing. It’s also called style. A great writer will almost have us humming the melody he or she makes on the page. Great writers are great composers.

We know about the music of poetry. Poetry is supposed to be musical. So, we want it to be read aloud, the better to catch its brilliant rhythms and melodies, its cadence, its beat. The writer sings his or her creation, in a way. I did read recently about a poet who said reading aloud robs readers of the ability to make their own decisions about how and when to place stress and emphasis on the words in the poem. But you can have both, can’t you? You can read the poem yourself. When we hear a poem, we better understand that often the sound *is* the meaning, or that sound and meaning together are what makes it poetry. When we hear “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate,” can we really distinguish between sound and meaning?

We seldom think of prose in this way. But the music of prose is one of the things that makes it unique and pleasurable. Some writers refer to this as the style of a writer—E. B. White, for one. Here’s what he said in *The Elements of Style*: “When we speak of Fitzgerald’s style, we don’t mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on the paper.” But you can see White chose to describe the phenomenon of style with the musical word *sound*. So what others may call style, I—and others—call music. Here’s what Susan Cheever once said in an interview: “When you write, you’re creating music inside the
reader’s head. One of the many important things about music is rhythm, and that’s sentence structure. If you’re not paying attention to sentence structure, it’s like you’re playing notes without rhythm. How crazy would that be? You must pay attention to the rhythm of your sentences and the rhythm of your words—each word has a rhythm. You should be scanning your lines even in nonfiction prose.”

One of the best ways of looking at the idea of rhythm and music in prose is to write the same thing in three or four different ways. That is, to experiment with a concept in which all the variations say what needs to be said and the differences are matters of rhythm and melody.

So, for example, let’s turn to murder. Here are four ways of telling the reader you shot a woman:

- I picked up the gun and shot her.
- I picked up the gun, and I shot her.
- I picked up the gun. I shot her.
- I picked up the gun. Then I shot her.

Each of these sentences provides the reader with all the information about the killing he or she needs. But you can provide the reader with various melodies with each of these choices, and each one is slightly different. (I won’t even go into different verbs—e.g., I picked up the gun and I killed her.) So, if each of these sentences packs the same information, on what do you base your choice? On music. Of course, as was mentioned, the music in writing is never isolated. But that’s another matter. Something in the melody will appeal to you more in one of these sentences, and you’ll choose it. When you do make your choice, you usually have a sense of regret, because the other versions possess qualities you wish your choice had, but you can’t have everything. Writers live with that.

As Thomas Pynchon wrote, “Writers are naturally drawn, chimpanzee-like, to the color and the music of this English idiom we are blessed to have inherited. When given the choice we will usually try to use the more vivid and tuneful among its words.”

A deft use of punctuation can produce lyrical writing. Take the comma. Just look at this masterful use of commas from Mark Twain. This passage is from *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck’s way down the river at this point, and he comes ashore and sees a circus:
It was a real bully circus. It was the splendidest sight that ever was, when they all come riding in, two and two, a gentleman and lady, side by side, the men just in their drawers and under-shorts, and no shoes or stirrups, and resting their hands on their thighs, easy and comfortable—there must a’ been twenty of them—and every lady with a lovely complexion, and perfectly beautiful, and looking just like a gang of real sure-enough queens, and dressed in clothes that cost millions of dollars, and just littered with diamonds. It was a powerful fine sight; I never see anything so lovely. And then one by one they got up and stood, and went a-weaving around the ring so gentle and wavy and graceful, the men looking ever so tall and airy and straight, with their heads bobbing and skimming along, away up there under the tent-roof, and every lady’s rose-leafy dress flapping soft and silky around her hips, and she looking like the most loveliest parasol.

No wonder Faulkner said he had to wait five years each time before he reread *Huckleberry Finn*. With his commas precisely placed to produce a cadence like the gait of a horse, Twain guides and controls our eye. The writing isn’t excited or exclamatory; it’s calm and easy, letting the element of wonder, such a delicate thing, take precedence in our mind. Twain also uses the word “and” to keep the writing connected and all of one steady pace, even as he breaks it into an easy rhythm with those commas. Hemingway learned a lot from Twain. A great writer will have such control over his or her composition that he or she will force you, the reader, to read it—and hear it—precisely the way he or she wants you to. Twain does just that here.

Comedic writing, which may, at first, seem far from musical, is, in fact, the most musical of writing in many ways. What is comedy but the perfect use of caesura? What’s the difference between: “Take my wife, please,” and “Take my wife. Please.” *Everything.* Yet the difference is a single musical note, or, rather, beat. These are exactly the same words, but the reactions couldn’t be more different. Comedic writing relies on musical choices. A great comedic writer must have a great ear.

Music in prose isn’t always mellifluous. That’s because the music really never stands alone. If the story is austere, the music can be, too. You can see this plainly in detective stories. You may call this crime writing or murder mysteries or whatever. But at its best, it’s just plain fine writing. Period. I love the music of good detective fiction. Because it’s about crime and punishment, you’re going to get the kind of prose that reflects the people who deal with that world. Here’s the beginning of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, by James M. Cain:

They threw me off the hay truck about noon. I had swung on the night before, down at the border, and as soon as I got up there under the canvas, I went to sleep. I needed plenty of that, after three weeks in Tia Juana, and I was still getting it when
they pulled off to one side to let the engine cool. Then they saw a foot sticking out and threw me off.

This is music without flourish, without trills. Not an extra note anywhere. That’s the way it is throughout the lean 116-page novel. Ever notice how taut and brief so much detective fiction is? Not a single adjective or adverb here. Why this kind of writing is so terribly difficult to do is that the nouns and verbs carry the tune, and you had better be very attuned to your character and your story or the whole thing will fall apart.

Now, compare James M. Cain’s beginning to the beginning of William Faulkner’s story, “Barn Burning”:

The store in which the Justice of the Peace’s court was sitting smelled of cheese. The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.

Here, the unusual sequences are mirroring the boy’s thought process, and yet it produces a unique music as well, so Faulkner has achieved the great Flaubertian balance between the meaning and the music of words. Faulkner always had sufficient dramatic meaning and worked incredibly hard to insure that when he broke with the heartbeat, the ta-Da, ta-DA, he did so with profoundly memorable song.

The introduction of detective fiction is a good place in which to talk about a change of key. We know how the shift from a major to a minor key in music can affect us, often with a sense of foreboding or melancholy. It can happen in prose, too. Take the start of James Crumley’s first-rate book, Dancing Bear. Crumley begins his 228-page novel with a simple, easy sentence:

We had been blessed with a long, easy fall for western Montana.

It’s lyrical and short, ending with that sing-y word, Montana. Then Crumley expands a bit, but still maintains his easy lyricism:

Two light snowfalls had melted before noon, and in November we had three weeks of Indian Summer so warm and seductive that even we natives seemed to forget about winter.
But what next? Darkness and drama, and a clear change of key, beginning with a hard conjunction:

But in the canyon of Hell Roaring Creek, where I live, when the morning breezes stirred off the stone-cold water and into the golden dying rustle of the cottonwoods and creek willows, you could smell the sear, frozen heart of winter, February, or, as the Indians sometimes called it, the Moon of the Children Weeping in the Lodges, crying in hunger.

The information here isn’t what sends a warning chill through your body. It’s the foreboding music. Phrases of fear broken by commas: The word “Hell” affixed to the narrator’s home; morning breezes “stirred”—a word associated with ghost and spirits; “off the stone-cold water”—we are no longer in the world of “warm and seductive”; and then those dreadful words, “dying, sear, frozen, Weeping, crying, hunger.”

We are fairly certain we are not going to be treated to a pleasant book about the changes of seasons in Montana. Crumley’s cold notes enter the bloodstream, and we know something is afoot.

I love the unique dissonance of Marianne Moore’s prose. This is the arresting beginning to the “Foreword” from *A Marianne Moore Reader*:

Published: it is enough. The magazine was discontinued. The edition was too small. One paragraph needs restating. Newspaper cuts on the fold or disintegrates. When was it published, and where? ‘The title was “Words and…” something else. Could you say what it was?’ I have forgotten.

Music is often about counterpoint. In writing, dialogue is all about counterpoint. When you discuss dialogue in American prose, you eventually will arrive at Hemingway’s door. At his best, as in stories like “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” he pumps the heart of the story by the crisp, cold dialogue of the two waiters hoping an old drunk sad man will leave the café so they can go home. The dialogue is almost like a call-and-answer chant. Whether they admit it or not, so many writers have drunk from Hemingway’s spring. A story like “The Sea Change,” with its relentlessly moving yet delicately balanced point-counterpoint, is still being written today. It begins:

“All right,” said the man. “What about it?”
“No,” said the girl. “I can’t.”
“You mean you won’t.”
“I can’t,” said the girl. “That’s all that I mean.”
“You mean that you won’t.”
“All right,” said the girl. “You have it your own way.”
“I don’t have it my own way. I wish to God I did.”
“You did for a long time,” the girl said.
The dialogue goes on to reveal that the girl has had an affair with another woman. She says,

“It doesn’t do any good to say I’m sorry?”
“No.”
“Nor to tell you how it is?”
“I’d rather not hear.”
“I love you very much.”
“Yes, this proves it.”
“I’m sorry,” she said, “if you don’t understand.”
“I understand. That’s the trouble. I understand.”

What a bitter tune the two of them play, back and forth, one taking off from the other, as if it were a deadly jazz riff.

We get our doses of music in writing in unexpected ways sometimes. In government writing, for example. No, we don’t find it in our tax forms, but in two of our most famous American documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. We may have seen the poetry in Lincoln’s speech before, but what about Jefferson’s composition? We’ve been exposed to this writing for as long as we can remember. We all know how it begins, “When in the course of human events….” And we also know so well the part that goes, “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The word unalienable, so hard for children to pronounce, and with a meaning that is hard for a child to fathom, is nevertheless such a pretty sound. It takes six syllables to make that sound, so you don’t leave that concept easily.

Jefferson was a great lover of music, and I believe that one reason he chose that word on that hot summer day in Philadelphia was for its music. Now, what’s interesting is that Jefferson had originally written “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights.” It was Congress who made Jefferson take out “inherent,” thus depriving him of a nifty alliteration. They also, as you may notice, made him add the word “certain” before “inalienable.” Even Jefferson had to get his work vetted and approved.

By the way, what’s also interesting is that in his Autobiography, Jefferson has the word as inalienable in his version of the Declaration. How, I wonder, did it get switched to unalienable?

So, there is more music around us in the writing we are exposed to than we may think. Jefferson was deeply educated in English literature as well as in Greek and Latin literature. Who knows what caused him in
the end to write “When in the course of human events”? I suspect that his rhythms in English derived in no small measure from Latin, as well as from English. Then a phrase kept slipping into my head, and finally made itself known, “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita…” In the middle of the path of our life. The beginning of Dante’s Inferno. The rhythm is similar to the beginning of the Declaration, and so is the meaning. I checked with Monticello, and they confirmed that Jefferson did indeed possess a copy of the Divine Comedy in Italian. So we do know at least that this poem was part of Jefferson’s verbal musical heritage and that he may have drawn upon it.

Music in writing is more than what happens in a single sentence. It’s how that sentence performs in balance with the sentences that precede it and follow it. You may change or even eliminate a word or sentence because it’s out of tune with its neighbors. So, as a writer, comedic or not, you have to develop a good ear. If you’re lucky, you come from the South, where its entire history is an opera and every conversation is an aria. You will also be lucky as a Southerner in that your writing will inevitably be influenced by the speech of African Americans, people traditionally close to the land. The land informs and nurtures speech, as much as anything. But you will find inspiration in the music of the speech around you, wherever that is.

How do you become a better composer? Well, by writing, of course. Just as important, you need to be a desperate reader. Read everything that appeals to you, regardless of so-called merit. It has merit if you want to read it. This way, you’ll be absorbing the music, the different styles, and you’ll become aware of the vast possibilities. One critic speaking of the late Harold Brodkey’s writing said that as a young man first reading Brodkey his reaction was, “You mean you can actually write sentences like that?” In the end we are all working to compose original music. None of us can do this without absorbing the great music of the great writers of the past.

It is often in the revision that we find the true melody and harmony of our writing. That’s because these things are often a matter of subtle balances and intonations. We may not get it right on the first try. At a certain point as a writer you’ll be attuned to whether or not your writing is on key or off key. I think it would be wonderful to hear a great writer explain why he or she felt the melody in a sentence or paragraph of his or hers was wrong. Then, right.
In the end, the creation of original music in prose—or style, if you will—is that mysterious combination of everything you’ve learned, read and practiced with who you are. It’s unique, like your handwriting or fingerprint, though achieved with blood, sweat, and tears. But worth it. Because, in the end, as Flaubert said, “One must sing with one’s own voice.”

As I said, the music of great writers can be as complex and difficult to describe as actual music. Like any music by a great composer you love, you can eventually come to identify it, though you may not be able to describe how. Eventually, you are able to identify what is Hemingway, what is Henry James, what is Faulkner. As your ear gets better, you will also be able to recognize echoes of other writers’ music in a writer’s prose. If you listen closely, you can hear the melodies of Ring Lardner and F. Scott Fitzgerald in J.D. Salinger’s prose just as surely as you can hear Mozart in early Beethoven. Sometimes the task is to escape the tunes of those who precede you, because their influence is so powerful. I always felt that being a writer in Mississippi with Faulkner looming over you was a bit like being Frank Sinatra, Jr. But Brad Watson has done just fine.

Sometimes, as with Gerard Manley Hopkins, a writer will compose in such a way as to override those natural stresses and create new ones, resulting in an original melody. But Hopkins, a poet, was forced to actually employ stress marks to show us what he was trying to do, because our inclination is to go with the norm. Robert Frost found this painful (“It is painful to watch our sprung-rhythmists straining at the point of omitting one short from a foot for relief from monotony”). Yet such was Hopkins’ great power that one could say he succeeded far more often than not.

The attempts to set the work of writers to music America often seem unnecessary to me. Take Samuel Barber’s setting of James Agee’s “Knoxville: Summer 1915.” Agee may have been our most conscious composer. He was always composing music, and in fact you can often sense his effort to create great music, and it can be distracting. In art, the effort should never be visible. But he hits all the right notes in “Knoxville: Summer 1915”:

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there. First we were sitting up, then one of us lay down, and then we all lay down, on our stomachs, or on our sides, or on our backs, and they have kept on talking. They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all.
What does that last sentence accomplish? Surely, it’s not just a matter of conveying information to the reader, is it? Agee is lulling us with his music, lulling us into a state of dreaminess, so we can actually be with him on that summer evening. Barber’s rendition of this is lyrical enough, but I submit that setting Agee’s prose to music is gilding the lily. (Yeats told Robert Frost that there was “nothing he hated more than having his poems set to music…. It wasn’t the tune he had in his ear.”) I can see why Barber was drawn to Agee’s prose as a composer, though.

The music of a book or story or essay can be a stronger or lesser element in it depending on the writer’s predilections and talents. But the music is always there, even if it can only be faintly heard. The music of writing you encounter in books can be varied and different, and you may not like all of it. Probably not all of it, in fact. In the end it is often the music of the writing that turns you off, not what the writer is saying. You may grow out of it, too. I think one of the reasons I can no longer read Thomas Wolfe is that I no longer care for his music. I’ve grown out of it. Those long, sighing, longing sentences. Just as while I once thought Bolero was the greatest thing ever written, I’m not sure I could listen to it all the way through anymore. That’s not true for Mozart’s Haydn quartets, though, or for the Beatles’ music. Or for Faulkner’s short stories. Just so, you may not be prepared to listen to a certain writer’s music until you have reached a certain age.

I think it’s also important to point out that a writer’s music will change, develop and mature throughout his or her career. James Joyce provides no better example. In the beginning, we have the somber, simple rhythms of Dubliners. This is followed by a new freedom in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man that is exhilarating. In the end, we have Finnegans Wake, which you can say is one great huge Irish song that seems to have no confines whatsoever. Which do you prefer? You may be like the traditionalist Evelyn Waugh, who said Joyce started out fine enough with Dubliners, but then, basically, went mad. Or you may be like W. H. Auden, who liked the music of Finnegans Wake very much.

You will respond to music in your writing because of your body and your ear, but you must also work at it, too, as a composer of actual music must. You work at it as much with your ear as you do with your eye, though in time the two become, to borrow once more from Robert Frost, like your two eyes making one picture in sight. I think writing should be pleasing to the eye, but more pleasing to the ear. When we read, as Eudora Welty said, we hear the words, don’t we? We may have stopped
mouthing the words as we read long ago, but that doesn’t stop our inner ear from listening. I think when we read we are more listening, in the end, than seeing. To be conscious of the music in your writing is merely an acknowledgement of how we read, of how we absorb words.

The novelist Robert Stone, author of *Dog Soldiers* and *Damascus Gate*, got into a bit of a pickle some years back over his novel, *Outerbridge Reach*. He was accused by an English writer of stealing facts from a nonfiction book the man had written and using them in his novel without proper acknowledgement. Stone wrote a letter of rebuttal in which he said that, well, I probably should have expressed my debt a bit more emphatically to your book, but that isn’t the point. What’s important, he said, is that I supplied the music.