Melopoeia: Syncope, Interruption and Writing

Rebecca Luce-Kapler
Queen’s University

Hildegard von Bingen, a nun who lived during the Middle Ages, created haunting, rhythmic songs, written in the language of her visions—Latin. But this was not the Church’s Latin, of the learned, of men in an ivory tower. Some called it vulgate, an earthy and practical patter of common people. The freedom of her words blended with the freedom of her melodies in a liberating form of expression. Hildegard wrote: “When I was 42 years and seven months old, a burning light of tremendous brightness coming from heaven poured into my entire mind, like a flame that does not burn but enkindles.

It inflamed my entire heart and breast, like the sun that warms an object with its rays. All at once I was able to taste of the understanding of books—the Psalter, the Evangelists and the books of the Old and New Testaments” (CD liner notes). That taste of understanding was an embodied response to the esoteric.
texts of spirituality. Her visions brought the words “down to earth.”

Laurie Finke, in her examination of feminist theory through women’s writing, describes how, during the Middle Ages, the church constricted the female role in spiritual life and religious work until women were effectively cloistered in religious orders.

Some of those women responded by claiming mystical experiences and by relaying words inspired by God, which served to open up space to speak within a patriarchal and misogynistic society. While some of these mystics engaged in extreme self-punishing measures—including flagellation and starvation—they nevertheless found a way to enter into the public discourse.

Finke explains that medieval Christianity construed men as spirit and women as body and, since religion was the dominant mode of expression in that society, this thinking had considerable impact. Mysticism became a way for women such as Margery Kempe and Hildegard von Bingen to stretch those bounds and to turn the dominant discourse to their own purposes, to bring the spiritual into the body.

Drawing from de Certeau’s description of “poaching,” Finke writes: “The discourse of the female mystic was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body and it is, paradoxically, through
these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power” (1992: 78).

The visions disrupted the official interpretation. The women, using the very discourses that marginalized them, interrupted that language by introducing new rhythms—rhythms of the body—that were difficult to contain and created different possibilities.

The concept of interruption is an important one for we cannot hope to provoke without first getting attention and halting the commonplace and taken-for-granted language, whether we are speaking of religion or curriculum or other institutionalised practices. Sometimes powerful, embodied visions are needed, sometimes a direct challenging of the word as Leah does, and sometimes it is enough to use syncope to halt the rhythm for a moment, suspend time, pause for another breath. Where the rhythm changes, we find the moment of interpretation as our attention is drawn to what has previously been in the background. We have the opportunity to consider what is important.

**Syncope**

in a basement bedroom
peony drapes swallow
the last yellow light
black loneliness clots
her throat remembering
gauze curtains
on a second floor
and cold moonlight
like silver arrows
faint shivers of starlight
sounding
her father’s grain cough
as he reads Time
the house creak
at first wind
her sisters
restless in their sleeping
coyotes on distant hills
calling home

(Luce-Kapler, in press)

Poetry can serve as interruption—it draws our attention to rhythms and then reinterprets them. The breath can stop when we least expect it, leaving us wondering before coming to understand. In that moment of silence and waiting, we may see differently, and sometimes uncomfortably, as Wendy has found in introducing the rhythms of *The Snow Queen* to students.

Jane Hirshfield says of poetry: “because it thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavor of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one” (32). “In *language*, the fleshy tongue speaks” (1998: 110).

When I read the official interpretation of writing in the curriculum, I fall into the *logopoeia*—or at least into the holy logic of *logos* that Leah describes. Writing, according to the official curriculum, insists that students will

- identify the literary and informational forms suited to various purposes and audiences… use forms appropriately with an emphasis on supporting opinions or interpretations with specific information; use a variety of organizational techniques to present ideas and supporting details logically…

and, I am told[,] students use writing to record information and ideas, to express themselves, to communicate with others for various purposes, to reflect and learn (Ontario, Secondary English Curriculum)

Where is the acknowledgement that writing does not reflect an already existing world, but that it creates a world and ourselves; that writing is not just about skills and certainly not about given realities? I search in vain for the mention of poetry ….

I want to interrupt this story—and it is a story about writing: about writing for purposes beyond oneself for the good of the country and the economy; about writing accountably.

Several weeks ago, when some of us decided to interrupt the teacher candidate treadmill and offer writing over lunch, an interesting thing happened. Students wandered into the room hesitantly, shyly. After all, how does one enter a room where usually they hear about what to teach, how and when, a litany of practice for the becoming professional? Some of them noted that they had chosen to miss the workshop about coping...
with teacher stress to come here.

We told them we were not going to talk about teaching writing although they might learn some things about that anyway. We were simply creating a space, offering an interruption to the rhythm of the Faculty day for them to sit and write for themselves. As they chose a button from my grandmother’s button jar and set it in front of the special paper purchased in celebration of this time, I watched their uneasiness at being here. “I don’t write,” one young man told me. But he had come. He must have expected something would happen for him during this time.

As the button became their prompt for timed flow writing, they settled in for ten minutes and I watched their bodies soften into the normally hard chairs. The air in the room seemed slower, less intense. I could hear their breathing deepen. For forty-five minutes, we wrote and created poems and small vignettes. At the end, they had several pages of text, even the one who said he did not write. He volunteered to read a poem and then another did, and another, until finally everyone read.

As anxious students began to line up outside the door for the next class, the atmosphere changed and it was time to stop. “Thank you for coming,” we said. “We hope you enjoyed this.” “Aren’t we meeting again?” they asked. Sheila and I looked at one another. We had not thought beyond this one opportunity. I thought of the courses I had to prepare for, the teaching I needed to do in the next week, the reviews, the writing . . . but these few minutes had been a space of deep respite even for me. Energy had flowed in that room and I felt revitalized.

“I can be here next week,” I said. “Me too,” Sheila agreed, letting out her breath.

“This was the best break I have had since I came here,” one student said as she left the room.

We had created a syncope in our teacher education program, touched on the more-ness that Wendy describes. We had stopped the pace, taken away the instrumental language in which we were drowning and spent a few moments thinking differently. It seemed that in that short space of time, many of us had had the opportunity to remember what was important, to regroup, coming together in meaningful practice that was about paying attention to our existence in that place rather than just trying to survive it. This is the story of writing that I prefer.

Bruner tells us: “The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (1990: 49-50). I think that at one time the story of schooling must have seemed new, must have explained why we are now engaging in learning this way rather than following our parents
But was that story ever comprehensible? The story of why the children were taken from their families and gathered together with one adult who was, usually, a stranger. As Madeleine Grumet explains, “The common school movement and the feminization of teaching colluded in support of a program of centralized education that exploited the status and integrity of the family to strip it of its authority and deliver the children to the state” (1988: 39). Over time, this story of schooling has become further burdened with threads of the political, the economic and the cultural. Schooling is the canon, and the canonical curriculum needs interruption before there can be a fruitful story.

When I look at the mandated writing curriculum, the text that deems writing as important for communicating, learning and reflecting, but does not acknowledge how those processes occur, I am interested in the fact that there is also no mention of authorship. Nor is it easy to find out who authored the curriculum documents themselves. Strangely, their conception seems shrouded in secrecy. What does this say about writing?

The written word becomes a record, becomes attributable, as Foucault reminds us. We can find the one responsible and edit her or him. Perhaps the lack of authorship of the government curriculum speaks louder than I first thought.

Yet even when words are connected to an author, we easily can forget the rhythm of the writer’s heartbeat, the exhalation of her breath, her embodiment in the world that she takes to the page. Poems remind us of bodily understanding through the line breaks and silences, in poetry’s gustatory pleasure of sound. The visions of the medieval mystics could only be explained through the evocation of the body. About her music Hildegard von Bingen said, “Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, these watery varieties of sounds and silences, terrifying, mysterious, whirling and sometimes gestating and gentle must somehow be felt in the pulse, ebb, and flow of the music that sings in me” (CD liner notes). I am reminded again of Wendy’s sense of more-ness.

Susan Friedman (1994) considered other ways women interrupt narrative and claim public space. She noted that women have resisted what Virginia Woolf called “the tyranny of plot.” That is, they have used the structure to write their own ideologies as well as to challenge that structure to find forms that best tell their stories, often reaching beyond narrative to create a collaborative dialogue in their work; for instance, engaging the visual with the narrative or intertwining that narrative with lyric poetry.
We need to watch for opportunities of interruption and create a syncope in the curriculum story. We need to cast what Gary Morson calls “a sideshadow.” Morson pointed out that within texts as in life there are choices taken and those passed over, yet even those unactualized possibilities can leave their mark on history. A present, therefore, can grow from an unrealized past. These traces of paths taken and untaken in a text, Morson called “sideshadowing.” Sideshadowing restores the possibility of possibility: “to understand a moment is to grasp not only what did happen but also what might have happened” (1994: 118–119).

The story of curriculum is a site of contingency and possibility. Within such a subjunctive space, one can realize the complexity of experience while seeing the openings—the synopes—to call into question what we have believed. We realize not only what we have fostered, but what we could have offered or heard—what other voices echo through the lines. The poetic breath of the silence and syncope are possible in every moment, offering spaces for us to think and talk about other things.
Cutting Glass

sunlight
bounces from
waves
spills like tiny
marbles
along edges of
glass
cities and
seascapes
the brilliance of
energy
rolling over
sharp
lines of fragility
adrift in clear
plates
like the tenuous
pleasure
of early
summer

the question in
your eyes
that I answer
only in dreams
during darkness
when I forget
the high wire
we dance on
intense and
shimmering
waves of heat
from prairie
paving
some July at
noon

the way light
ripples over
glass
slips into rooms
by morning
becomes as
familiar as your
skin
beneath a
bigger sky
the humming of
longing
between our
fingertips
(Luce-Kapler,
in press)

**Resources**

Alberta Language Arts Curriculum Guides and Program of Studies, 2002.


Huebner, D., Hillis, V. (Ed.), & Pinar, W. [Introd.]. (1999). *The lure of the transcendent: The collected essays of Dwayne E. Huebner.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. [I have cited Dwayne Huebner from course readings and discussions offered during a doctoral seminar he taught at the University of Victoria, summer, 1998. The 1999 date refers to the subsequent publication of the course readings by Lawrence Erlbaum.]


About the Author:

Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Language and Literacy at Queen’s University in Kingston. She is a published poet whose research focuses on writing processes and pedagogies. Her collection of poetry, The Gardens Where She Dreams, will be published by Borealis Press in March 2003. Her book, Writing to Know Ourselves and the World, will be published by Erlbaum in Summer 2003.

E-mail: luce-kar@educ.queensu.ca