

SCULPTURE FOR SPOKEN VOICE

A tone poem recited with Martin Guttman in the Museumsquartier, Vienna, Austria, 2003

Written by ELI GOTTLIEB in 2003, © 2003 - 2008, All Rights Reserved.

This is language. Inside the ear of readerly habit, you're hearing language being spoken. I'm making statements, in English. English is particularly good at the following things: speed, aggression, numbering, listing, and naming objects with the littlest possible commitment to their ends. American English has a slightly cold metallic tang in the mouth. It's got a brutalist efficiency. It is indifferent to the dark, downward tending vegetable kingdom of the past. It has few prehistorical formations. It's all about plasticity, conductivity, malleability, speed. If it is true that cultures speak loudest at the moment of their disappearance, then it should come as no surprise that America is so rich with the ghost-voices of other nations. These voices crouch whispering just behind the scrim of spoken speech. They inform the sounds of English. They shade it and give it its flavor. And then there's business, which is the nervous system of American English. To my ear English is the sound a machine might make, alone in a room, counting coins.

The lips and mouth muscles of an average adult human weigh three ounces. A phoneme is the uttermost acoustic particle of language. Sixteen words exist to describe the physical pronunciation of English. Four of them are:

Aspirant

Plosive

Bilabial

Fricative

Pause.

The air around my mouth tastes somewhat green tonight. The speaking of words is somewhat my theme tonight. Words tremble in harness between this world and the next. All of poetry is in the “b” of subtle. Rhyme is the hypostatized chime of the future coming. Words work for us even as they make us work. To be spoken by English is a remarkable thing. English has a hitting sensation as it arrives in your face. The words do not hold a distance off as they do in all other languages more rooted in a praxis of place.

PAUSE

Italian is round and spherical. French is tautly analytical. German is depth-driven and ponderous. English, well English is mainly fast.

Or is that last, my ass. Crucial jealousies, and then the hairpin bent an endgame over its knee and broke it into a million pieces—Jesus, that gives me the jitters, and some gas!

Always, to begin, there is the childhood. Mine was a tranquil affair. My earliest memories were of the spiritual soul. The light. The air. The space around my body. And then one day finally my boats set out to sea. It was all too soon. The omens were terrible, and the skies were dark, but Freud was my god and I had no fear. Instead, I lived in the paradise of total achieved explanation. It was exquisite. The skies opened

overhead and the winds of biography blew my craft along the waves, lightly, skimmingly. I thought the voyage would never end until I arrived, made landfall, and explored the naïve simple-minded sexual blandishments of the natives.

Later, growing up, animals intrigued me. They seemed to promise such abstract liberty. I imagined the key-hole accuracy of their minds. I loved the non-judgement of their intervention in life. Usually in my studies I favored the larger apes. Much of this work took place originally in Sardinia, in the thick green alphabetical jungle.

Josef Conrad wrote about the “terrible yearning in a dog’s eyes to be human.”

Sings slowly: “No one knows, the trouble I’ve seen.”

My father, to take one example, was a tall, big, thunderous, bloviated basher of a man. But he wanted to be a scholar! He dreamed of libraries of brass and mahogany enriched with tall women speaking in sexualized paragraphs! He knew that when held in the hand, books impart worlds that spiral backwards in time even as the small, prompt, personal letters on the page provoke a windfall of insight sprawled across the present tense! At least he dressed the part. Of a Dad, that is. He had his hat. He had his severity of mien, the faultless crease of his jeans. He had his sense of life as something ruefully contracted from a passing breeze.

He was born like me in New York City. There’s an endlessness to it all if you live in New York. There’s an insatiable onward streaming if you live in New York. It’s

electrical, heretical, bombastical, fantastical, mixed metaphorical and downright terrible, but it's also lovely and green and blue. There's a thing about goods and services in New York. There's a thing about a new suit of clothes in New York. There's a thing about uncluttered views from the paying floors. Ornate doors. Capital harmonics. Aestheticized electronics. There's the way the city's guts are veined with subways through which people move like motile flagellants in the peristalsis of large machines. The city dreams dreams. It floats on a sea of bills. The soundtrack is so loud you sing along, ho. Year in year out, it's the same bright chiming song: acquisition! Acquisition!. And you're moved by the immensities of used feeling it contains.

Mother always preferred a more dialectical approach. She wore jewelry especially made for cruelty. It sparkled in all the right places. She told me it was fun to be beautiful. She told me it was fun to be clean. That's why she tormented me with microbes. That's why she sterilized me in the oven of her gaze, day in day out. We lazed together in an idyll. We ignored the flashing teeth of the sharks as they drew near. We admired the fortitude of the trunks of palm. We poured fine sand through our fingers in the buttery sun. We were in love. It couldn't last forever.