Final Writing Assignment: Writing: Living with/in Words
Due Date: November 29, 2022
Grade Value: 15%
Length: 4-5 pages (double spaced)

Part One:

Writing…is an action, an event, a performance.
David Bartholomae

We have been thinking and talking about editing and writing and reading and language, and the way they are always and already elegantly entangled. But you already know this: your in-class writing pieces (the ones you wrote in our first class of the term), in fact, are already flickering with ideas that are connected to an ongoing conversation and debate taking place among contemporary writers, theorists, philosophers, and sociolinguists who are writing about language, and who are paying attention to the relations between language and society, the relations between language and identity, between language and writing, between language and memory. What we don't know enough about, however, is what *you* think language is, what you think it does, what you think it can – or can't – do. We don't know enough about what you think it means to live with/in words.

Over the course of this term, you will be developing, with your editor, a writing piece that explores the notion of "Language: Living with/in Words", a piece that you will submit for potential publication to the PWSA's online journal *Inventio.* I am inviting you to add to the contemporary conversation about language/s by zooming in on a particular encounter you've had with language to investigate and explore an aspect of your relationship to language from your own personal, particular, and peculiar context.

I'm asking you to write about something that is interesting to you, to write about something you care deeply about. I'm asking you to open up a process of questioning and then write a conversational essay (or story, or series of poems, or graphic essay, or…or…or…) that shows your thinking on the page: develop a critical, contemplative, and reflective exploration on your topic that narratively and stylistically unfolds your insights about a specific question that addresses your particular encounter with language.

I ask that you also keep in mind the larger social, temporal, cultural, and educational context from which you are writing. Your experience in the world gives you access to this context. It's always a good idea, however, to think *with* somebody: another writer. Gilles Deleuze reminds us that "…writing is a flow among others." Write, then, in the company of one of your others. I supplied you with a few quotations to think-write with on our first day together; I will add a few more here at the bottom of the page. You are not limited to these quotations and are free to

find your own writer to think with. Choose someone who can offer you a framework, someone whose views prompt you and guide you toward a different way of "seeing language" and how it is implicated in the various ways we navigate and negotiate identities in everyday life.

Let me say this bit again: write about something you care about. Find out more about that thing you care about by writing through its complexities. I am asking you, above all, to produce knowledge, to take us into a scene of writing that will reveal insights about your experience with language. I'm inviting you to add to the conversation and let us know what you think about the topic and how, from your perspective, we might know about or experience language differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities of language, I invite you to help us see and experience language, uniquely, by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the preconceived representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about language.

Language is not just your topic this term, it is your event.

Part Two:

On November 1st, you will submit a substantial draft of your writing piece to your in-class editor. On November 15th, you will receive your editor's substantive editorial recommendations (Part of Assignment 2, due November 15th). Once you receive these recommendations, step into the final revision process and, while editing your own manuscript, please engage with the following:

- Critically reflect upon your editor's recommendations and consider which suggestions you will accept and/or reject.

- Revise your piece by further developing your "argument" while keeping in mind Williams's and Bizup's key principles of cohesion, global coherence, concision, motivation, emphasis, shape, and elegance.

- Keep reading: pop on to *The Electric Typewriter* (http://tetw.org/Linguistics) and read through the smart, stimulating, and critically reflective essays, all of which are written in conversational style. Use them as a structural template. Let them inspire you and give you permission to play with and experiment with your own style. Notice, too, how these essays are in a conversation with language, with writing and reading and editing, and that they are, like your own piece, making a contribution to the ongoing, vital, and urgent debate in the field of language.

- Make an appointment, if you wish, to come and talk with me about your manuscript. We can either meet in my office or have a conversation on Zoom to discuss your paper and move through any pressing questions you have about content or style.

Submit an electronic copy of your writing piece on November 29 (dbaus@yorku.ca) – or submit a hardcopy in class on the 29th.

Finally, here are a few quotations about language which have inspired me and my own work, quotations I like to think with when I am thinking about language and writing:

If there is no risk, there is no writing.
Paul Auster

For each language you know, you are a different person.
Czech proverb

We don't live in a country, we live in a language.
E.M. Cioran

I only have one language; it is not mine.
Jacques Derrida

…writing is a flow among others.
Gilles Deleuze

….there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. Sometimes – I would even say always – several tongues. There is impurity in every language.
Jacques Derrida

First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.
Virginia Woolf

A sentence has been heard, now listen.
Gertrude Stein

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative.

Eva Hoffman

For some, to find beauty is to search through ruins. For some of us beauty must be made over and over again out of the sometimes fragile, the sometimes dangerous. To write is to be involved in this act of translation, of succumbing or leaning into another body's idiom.

Dionne Brand

…the humanists have always insisted that you don't learn to think wholly from one language: you learn to think better from linguistic conflict, from bounding one language off another.

Northrop Frye

We invented language so we could lie to each other and ourselves.

Charlie Kaufman

There are no truths, only stories.

Thomas King

We are fictions.

Lola Lemire Tostevin

Language is for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other.

Jacques Derrida

Language reveals the speaker, his position in terms of class, ethnicity, education, place of origin, gender.

James Baldwin

One never owns a language. A language can only be borrowed; it passes around like an illness or currency.

Roland Barthes

Living on the edge of two languages, living on the edge of two selves named and constructed by language, liberates the self from a monologic existence.

Smaro Kamboureli

From one day to another, from one page to another, writing changes languages. I have thought certain mysteries in the French language that I cannot think in English. This loss and this gain are in writing too. I have drawn the H. You will have recognized it depending on which language

you are immersed in. This is what writing is: I one language, I another language, and between the two, the line that makes them vibrate; writing forms a passageway between two shores.

Helene Cixous

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.

Roland Barthes

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

John Updike

A writer must resist the pressure of old formulae and work towards new combinations of language.

Jeanette Winterson

I have been given this language and I intend to use it.

Chinua Achebe

What counts and is counted then, is what we do while speaking, what we do to each other, how we again touch each other by mixing our voices.

Jacques Derrida

Style becomes nonstyle, and one's language lets an unknown foreign language escape from it, so that one can reach the limits of language itself and become something other than a writer, conquering fragmented visions that pass through the words of a poet, the colours of a painter, or the sounds of a musician.

Gilles Deleuze

Everything in my memory strives to be the collection of a language that has not yet been invented and the invention of a language that one recollects.

Maurice Blanchot

What a writer is looking for are the relationships within languages. The tensions and harmonies between words and meaning that gradually can be resolved into form.

Jeanette Winterson

One studies what one desires or fears.

Roland Barthes

I have withheld more than I have written.

Dionne Brand

Music Communicates

"It's the bears!" said one of my students, followed by another, and followed by the others. When I asked them to find what I'm playing from two full pages of illustrations, their hands shot up in the air the minute I finished. I described how I thought the bears looked like in the illustration—black, angry looking, with their mouths open as though arguing with one another—in the music language. My students understood my presentation in music, and translated it into an English phrase. It was an introductory exercise to get my students thinking how music can generate meaning, and their homework was to compose their own little motifs and show the class.

Many people would agree that music is a universal language that allows people of different cultures to understand each other. I have certainly said that in the past when advertising the benefits of music lessons. But how does music communicate? Music composition is just like writing and speaking. It's a skill that we have to learn and practise to effectively deliver the message. To compose or to perform, one must know the mechanics of the music language. But music is also unlike verbal communication with its ability to break through language barriers, for one does not have to know the mechanics of the musical language to understand the message. Music has the ability to evoke emotions when words fall short. Music is not only expressive; music is expression.

Let's begin with the similarities between music and verbal languages. Don't worry, it's not a boring music theory lesson. Articulation, tempo, and dynamics in music contribute to the meaning of a piece, and all these varying aspects affect the meaning of the message. We'll focus on what I see as the fundamental aspect—the articulation. Musical performance resembles singing, which comes from our natural rhythm of speech. In speech, we articulate with a natural

rhythm unique to the language. For instance, English has a natural iambic pentameter. This rhythm is more difficult to learn than the intonation of a language because it relies on our natural breathing. In music, we articulate just like in speech. Particularly on the piano, the intonation, or the pitch, is fixed. No learning is required to achieve the correct pitch, but the correct pitches don't equate to the correct messages. Having a series of pitches without articulation is like having randomly generated words. What the words mean when put together depends on the rhythm and stress in our speech. Naturally, we're not counting beats when we speak. Nor are we counting beats when playing music. We must play music the way we speak. In music performance, articulation is what makes a series of pitches into music.

In writing, punctuations serve as a visual of articulation. They also reinforce the relationship between words, creating movements. Music score, just like text, is static. But the notations in the score cue us the movement. In music writing, we have a system of notations which I like to call musical punctuations. A book without punctuations would be very interesting to read. Without the guidance of punctuations, reading feels like solving a puzzle. A sentence conveys a different meaning when the commas are taken out. For example, "I like chocolate chips and pop" and "I like chocolate, chips, and pop" sound different when we read them in our heads. Because we articulate the two sentences differently, we understand the messages differently. The comma is one of the first punctuations we learn in writing. It's so simple but so powerful, guiding the reader to articulate the words in their mind. The slur in music is like the comma in writing. Just like the comma, it's one of the first notations we learn in music reading. The slur runs from the beginning to the end of a phrase. In writing terms, the phrase marked by a slur can be a clause or a complete sentence, which would end with a period not a comma. Of course, the comma and period are not the only punctuations, and the slur is not the only

articulation sign, but the slur is so prominent because it's just everywhere. A slur marks an idea. An idea that should be interpreted as one unit. An idea that follows the one before and leads into the one after. These smaller ideas flow into one another, creating a cohesive section. The sections together build up a piece of music that delivers a message. Articulation brings music to life. Once the music comes to life, it stirs emotions.

In his essay "Is Music a Language," Mark Abel analyses the language-like character in music using Adorno's and Voloshinov's theories. Abel writes, "Adorno's description of music as language-like asserts the meaningfulness of music, its ability to 'say' something, something which cannot be said in another way and which without music would go unsaid" (80). The musical language speaks beyond the limits of the verbal language. Like how Wordsworth views poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", for me, music creates a spontaneous overflow of emotions (580). It also preserves a moment in time. Music is such a powerful communication tool because it allows us to communicate with people whom we may never be able to meet. It also pushes through the language barriers between different cultures. Music, unlike English, does not employ words as symbols of objects or concepts. This fluidity makes music contextual, meaning the audience doesn't need to pinpoint the exact musical elements to understand the overflowing emotion. For instance, the C major chord, consisting of the notes CEG, creates tension in F major, but creates resolution in C major. You don't have to know what each chord is made of; you don't even have to know what a chord is. As soon as you hear it in context, you'll feel the tension and resolution.

While chords may be too abstract, here are two real life examples of how music speaks beyond words. A Czech proverb says, "For each language you know, you are a different person." In the musical language, you can be anyone. Let's take a look at "Sonata quasi una fantasia, op.

27, no.2" by Ludwig van Beethoven. You probably know it by its famous nickname—"The Moonlight Sonata." If you have listened to this piece, think about how you responded before I tell you that this nickname was not given by Beethoven himself. Feeling inspired by the moonlight, poet Ludwig Rellstab gave the nickname "Moonlight" after Beethoven's death. "Sonata quasi una fantasia" means "sonata like a fantasy." A sonata is a strict musical form, and a fantasy is a piece that feels improvised. Beethoven wrote this sonata after Giulietta Guicciardi, whom he loved and loved him back, had to reject his proposal because of family pressure. Beethoven's rejection of the traditional sonata form in this piece reflects his disapproval of social norms. That's quite a different story from "moonlight," isn't it? Knowing all this information that you may not have been aware of, now think about whether the emotions you feel listening to this piece would change. All the emotions that we feel while listening to "Moonlight" doesn't come from nowhere. The score contains information on how the performer would interpret the music. The tempo Beethoven provides is "Adagio sostenuto," meaning slow and dignified, and sustained. The dynamic ranges from *piano* to *pianissimo,* soft to very soft. There is a long melody line, marked by long slurs, on top of an ongoing accompaniment and supported with deep bass notes. No pun intended, but this long smooth melody line creates a longing sense. Here's the magic—regardless of knowing anything about the title or score of this piece, one would hear the music as dignified, tranquil, sad, melancholy, and such, rather than cheerful, happy, and exciting. That's communication through the musical language. The music itself speaks into our emotions.

Like the mini-compositions I played for my students, music can also be a more descriptive translation of the verbal languages we speak. "Erlkönig" (Erlking) by Franz Schubert is an example of music interacting with text and acting as a translation to text. The musical term

is “word painting.” Schubert took inspiration from the poem “Erlkönig” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and composed a piece for voice and solo piano. The characters—the father, the son, the Erlking, and the narrator—are depicted using different registers of the singer’s voice. The repetition in the piano part conveys agitation. Agitation, for me, is the emotion which music conveys better than any languages I know. In “Erlkönig,” Schubert uses fast repeating chords in the right hand and short pulsing phrases in the opening—as opposed to what Beethoven used in “Moonlight”— to create restless feel with a sense of urgency.

Not only can music describe emotions, music can also describe a plotline. The through composed structure with no repeats tells the audience that the father and son are moving forward. In the end, the fast-approaching music comes to a sudden drop, signifying the son’s death. Within this four-minute piece, the key changes a few times. Every time, the key change signifies a plot twist. Remember when I touched on the function of chords in different contexts? A chord that creates resolution in one place can create tension in another. Because of this nature, the tension can continue to circle without ever coming to an end. Even thinking about this never-ending cycle feels unsettling. This circular nature serves as a natural transition from one scene to another, even when we don’t understand the lyrics.

With my limited German, I would understand nothing other than there’s a father and a son, and maybe someone else. Though there is an English translation of this poem, our bilingual folks would understand that each language has its nuances that’s not translatable into another language. Schubert’s composition doesn’t translate the poem “Erlkönig” word for word for me, but I can hear the different characters, and I can feel the emotions as though I were the characters in the poem. I live through the story of a German poem through its musical translation, a translation that says beyond the limitations of German or English. Exactly how Schubert

achieved these effects of “word painting” can be found in his score, his written record. This is what musicians spend hours after hours deciphering, just like how literary scholars would spend hours after hours analysing a poem. I believe there’s a reason why music is also called music literature.

Back to the story we started with—the composition exercise with my students. Starting the following week, my students took turns showcasing their compositions to the class. Contrary to my results, most compositions took over ten to fifteen guesses for someone to get the answer right, with an occasional success of within ten guesses. How come the ones I created were so easy to guess? Well, because I’ve gained a broader vocabulary, grammar, and literary devices over the years. The amazing part is that my students didn’t have to have the same level of fluency in the musical language as I did to understand my message. The introductory lesson was not about the techniques of composition, but about the fact that music says something, something that need not be translated into any other languages for the audience to understand.

Bibliography

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