3. Earl of Chatham

What Macaulay Can Teach Us About Phrase Lengths

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), British author, historian, politician, peer of the realm, is sadly, and unreasonably neglected these days, primarily because his writing style seems far too ornate, not succinct, and is not couched in the two-second sound byte that is today's crummy norm. Among his many writings are *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), *History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848, Vol. 1 and 2; 1855, Vol. 3 and 4; and 1861, Vol. 5) as well as articles from the Edinburgh Review published as a series of *Critical and Historical Essays* (Longman, 1843), perhaps modeled after Plutarch, which, as with Plutarch, provide enormous insight not only into the person and times being written about, but also into the writer, and his era.

Here are two of my favorite extracts[1] from two of the "Essays", hereinafter referred to as "Chatham" and "Pitt".

> At this conjuncture Lord Rockingham had the wisdom to discern the value, and secure the aid, of an ally, who, to eloquence surpassing the eloquence of Pitt, and to industry which shamed the industry of Grenville, united an amplitude of comprehension to which neither Pitt nor Grenville could lay claim. A young Irishman had, some time before, come over to push his fortune in London. He had written much for the booksellers; but he was best known by a little treatise, in which the style and reasoning of Bolingbroke were mimicked with exquisite skill, and by a theory, of more ingenuity than soundness, touching the pleasures which we receive from the objects of taste. He had also attained a high reputation as a talker, and was regarded by the men of letters who supped together at the Turk's Head as the only snatch in conversation for Dr. Johnson. He now became private secretary

> to Lord Rockingham, and was brought into Parliament by his patron's influence. These arrangements, indeed, were not made without some difficulty. The Duke of Newcastle, who was always meddling and chattering, adjured the First Lord of the Treasury to be on his guard against this adventurer, whose real name was O'Bourke, and whom his Grace knew to be a wild Irishman, a Jacobite, a Papist, a concealed Jesuit. Lord Rockingham treated the calumny as it deserved; and the Whig party was strengthened and adorned by the accession of Edmund Burke.

And here is "Pitt":

> In our time, the audience of a member of Parliament is the nation. The three or four hundred persons who may be present while a speech is delivered may be pleased or disgusted by the voice and action of the orator; but, in the reports which are read the next day by hundreds of thousands, the difference between the noblest and the meanest figure, between the richest and the shrillest tones, between the most graceful and the most uncouth gesture, altogether vanishes. A hundred years ago, scarcely any report of what passed within the walls of the House of Commons was suffered to get abroad. In those times, therefore, the impression which a speaker might make on the persons who actually heard him was everything. His fame out of doors depended entirely on the report of those who were within the doors. In the Parliaments of that time, therefore, as in the ancient commonwealths, those qualifications which enhance the immediate effect of a speech, were far more important ingredients in the composition of an orator than at present. All those qualifications Pitt possessed in the highest degree. On the stage, he would have been the finest Brutus or Coriolanus ever seen. Those who saw him in his decay,[2] when his health was broken, when his mind was untuned, when he had been removed from that stormy assembly of which he thoroughly knew the temper, and over which he

possessed unbounded influence, to a small, a torpid, and an unfriendly audience, say that his speaking was then, for the most part, a low, monotonous muttering, audible only to those who sat close to him, that when violently excited, he sometimes raised his voice for a few minutes, but that it sank again into an unintelligible murmur. Such was the Earl of Chatham, but such was not William Pitt. His figure, when he first appeared in Parliament, was strikingly graceful and commanding, his features high and noble, his eye full of fire. His voice, even when it sank to a whisper, was heard to the remotest benches; and when he strained it to its full extent, the sound rose like the swell of the organ of a great Cathedral, shook the house with its peal, and was heard through lobbies and down staircases to the Court of Requests and the precincts of Westminster Hall. He cultivated all these eminent advantages with the most assiduous care. His action is described by a very malignant observer as equal to that of Garrick. His play of countenance was wonderful: he frequently disconcerted a hostile orator by a single glance of indignation or scorn. Every tone, from the impassioned cry to the thrilling aside, was perfectly at his command. It is by no means improbable that the pains which he took to improve his great personal advantages had, in some respects, a prejudicial operation, and tended to nourish in him that passion for theatrical effect which, as we have already remarked, was one of the most conspicuous blemishes in his character.

The first thing to note is that the sentences are of inordinate length relative to present custom. To give an idea of how extensive the sentences are, we provide a table listing, for each sentence, the number of words and syllables, as well as interruptions. “Chatham” has 8 sentences; “Pitt” 17 sentences. The shortest sentence (the sixth) in “Chatham” is 9 words. The first sentence (50 words) is the longest. We provide the same information for “Pitt”.

CHATHAM

Colons	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Semicolons	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Commas	6	2	4	1	1	2	1	7
Syllables	79	21	71	51	29	16	68	34
Words	50	15	49	34	17	9	47	22
SENTENCE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

PITT

Colons	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Semicolons	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Commas	1	5	1	2	-	4	-	1	15	1	4	5	-	-	-	2	5
Syllables	19	100	27	30	24	62	16	21	138	14	34	79	21	24	36	23	76
Words	13	69	23	20	17	36	9	14	94	12	23	62	11	15	20	15	52
SENTENCE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17

The syllable information is perhaps of less interest, but it is useful to be reminded that changes in the number of words are not necessarily reflected by changes in the number of syllables. Of far greater interest are the number of commas per sentence, and how they are distributed, as that provides a sense of the temporal progression needed when reading.

All this can be associated with music as follows:

Think of the entire paragraph as a movement, or perhaps a subsection of a movement. Think of a sentence as a phrase; and consider the commas to be indications of sub-phrases, or sections delineated within a phrase. For words, think bars. Notice once again how different the sentence/phrase lengths are in terms of the number of words/bars per phrase/sentence. One might say that there are no sentences short enough to represent really short musical phrases e.g. 3-bar phrases;

but I assure you, Macaulay knew how to write 3 or 4 word sentences. Far more important, consider the differences between phrase lengths of x bars or words versus y bars or words, and the variability between short and long sentences/phrases. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven etc show similar structural variability; and just as Macaulay does not parse neatly into identical little packets, H, M & B also do NOT uniformly parse into little piles of 4, 8, 16, and 32 bars, as we have been brainwashed into believing by most of our teachers and colleagues.

There will be those who say that music is not speech, is not writing; that music is related to dance form, and that the analogy to speech, even to poetry, is at best specious. My answers are:

(a) there are many aspects of dance, including Western dance, which are not as four-square as everybody would like to believe;

(b) dance is far from the only influence in Western classical music. One must include: chant (as in Gregorian, or other Plain Chant); epic poetry, which was essentially sung speech; song, such as the troubadours', or even the English madrigalists'; folk music, etc. All these aforementioned have had at least as much influence on music as does dance, and none (with the possible exception of certain poetry) falls easily into equidistant metric structures.

Now speaking of equidistant metric structures, not only do we attempt to parse our metric structures into units of 4, 8, 16, 32, but we also shove in something called a barline, which we do at equidistant intervals.

Now to truly offend EVERYBODY:

What would be the result were we to insert barlines into Macaulay?

Here are two versions taken from the same example of Chatham,

where in one example, we have inserted barlines every 4 words (as in $\frac{4}{4}$); the other of which has barlines every 3 words. Try to read the example faithfully, paying attention to the barline, stressing the first and last words, bringing to the fore the 4-ness or 3-ness of the respective versions. What, if anything, does this add to your understanding or comprehension, to your affinity or enjoyment in reading this? Very well, you will say, this is a completely artificial construct, and I have not taken into account the fact that the words, when read, are spaced apart through the use of commas.

Ex 1 (by threes)

At this conjuncture | Lord Rockingham had | the wisdom to |
discern the value, | and secure the | aid, of an | ally, who, to
| eloquence surpassing the | eloquence of Pitt, | and to
industry | which shamed the | industry of Grenville, | united
an amplitude | of comprehension to | which neither Pitt | nor
Grenville could | lay claim. A | young Irishman had, | some
time before, | come over to | push his fortune | in London.
He | had written much | for the booksellers; | but he was |
best known by | a little treatise, | in which the | style and
reasoning | of Bolingbroke were | mimicked with exquisite |
skill, and by | a theory, of | more ingenuity than | soundness ,
touching the | pleasures which we | receive from the| objects
of taste. | He had also | attained a high | reputation as a |
talker, and was |regarded by the | men of letters |who

Ex. 2 (by fours)

At this conjuncture Lord | Rockingham had the wisdom | to discern
the value, | and secure the aid, | of an ally, who, | to eloquence
surpassing the | eloquence of Pitt, and | to industry which shamed |
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to Lord Rockingham, | and was brought into | Parliament by his
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without | some difficulty. The Duke | of Newcastle, who was | always
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be on his guard | against this adventurer, whose | real name was
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Jacobite, | a Papist, a concealed | Jesuit. Lord Rockingham treated |
the calumny as it | deserved; and the Whig | party was strengthened
and | adorned by the accession | of Edmund Burke.

Paul Zukofsky -- What is seen; What is not seen
Paul Zukofsky -- Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas

Macaulay - Earl of Chatham
Macaulay - Earl of Chatham
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Here are two more versions where we have once again divided things into the equivalent of $\frac{4}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ but this time we have made the assumption that a comma or stop is the metric equivalent of a word.

Ex. 3 (by threes, comma = beat)

At this conjuncture | Lord Rockingham had | the wisdom to | discern the value | , and secure | the aid, | of an ally |, who, | to eloquence surpassing | the eloquence of |Pitt, and |to industry which | shamed the industry | of Grenville, | united an amplitude | of comprehension to | which neither Pitt | nor Grenville could | lay claim. | A young Irishman | had, some | time before, | come over to | push his fortune | in London. | He had written | much for the | booksellers; but | he was best | known by a | little treatise, | in which the | style and reasoning | of Bolingbroke were | mimicked with exquisite | skill, and | by a theory |, of more | ingenuity than soundness |, touching the | pleasures which we | receive from the | objects of taste |. He had | also attained a | high

Ex. 4 (by fours, comma = beat)

At this conjuncture Lord | Rockingham had the wisdom |
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who, | to eloquence surpassing the | eloquence of Pitt, |
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had, some time | before, come over | to push his fortune
| in London. He | had written much for | the booksellers;
but | he was best known | by a little treatise |, in which
the | style and reasoning of | Bolingbroke were mimicked
with | exquisite skill, and | by a theory, | of more
ingenuity than | soundness, touching the | pleasures
which we receive | from the objects of | taste. He had |
also attained a high | reputation as a talker |, and was

Are these versions “better” or not? In other words, are the barlines less problematic because we have given temporal weight to the commas, etc.? I personally believe that these versions are in fact an improvement, but no thanks to the barline. It is the spacing out of the

words which diminishes the power or importance (prominence) of the barline, thereby making it less disruptive, less offensive.

Now you will say, this still is an artificial construct because we all know that no matter how far we spread apart the particles of speech, the entire concept of prose is antithetical to a set of equidistant stresses, but if that is true, why do you want to take music, purportedly the higher art, the more metaphysical, the art not encumbered by the need to convey meaning or fact or data or idea and force that higher art into a series of prison cells?

You may also say that the congruences between Macaulay and music are too great and there is no way that one can utilize barlines so as to satisfy the style of Macaulay's writings.

Here is an example where, for commas, we have substituted barlines, and for semi-colons and periods, we have substituted double barlines. I put it to you that these variable-length barlines are not disruptive to what Macaulay is doing.

Ex. 5 (BARS as PUNCTUATION)

At this conjuncture Lord Rockingham had the wisdom to
discern the value, | and secure the aid, | of an ally, |
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London. | He had written much for the booksellers; | but
he was best known by a little treatise, | in which the style
and reasoning of Bolingbroke were mimicked with
exquisite skill, | and by a theory, | of more ingenuity
than soundness, | touching the pleasures which we
receive from the objects of taste. | He had also attained a
high reputation as a talker, | and was regarded by the

And last, a version which approaches poetry, with each segment within a comma on its own line. Note how placing the text in this manner leavens it, allows it to "rise".

Ex. 6

At this conjuncture
Lord Rockingham
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and secure the aid,

of an ally,

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the industry of Grenville,

united an amplitude of comprehension
to which neither Pitt
nor Grenville
could lay claim.

A young Irishman had,

some time before,

come over

Paul Zukofsky -- What is seen; What is not seen
Paul Zukofsky -- Ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on ne voit pas

Macaulay - Earl of Chatham 1 of 5
Macaulay - Earl of Chatham 1 of 5
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This use of space is not unknown among speakers. Churchill -- in the typescripts of his speeches -- would leave large (vertical) spaces on the page, so that he would know when to pause, the placement of all

such dramatic pauses carefully thought out beforehand and used to clarify the meaning, increase the tension, and keep the audience enthralled.

But all this is the art of rhetoric (or as Adam Smith would spell it, rhetorick), defined by the Century Dictionary as:

“that art which consists in a systematic use of the technical means of influencing the minds, imaginations, emotions, and actions of others by the use of language.”

But is not what musicians do that very same art of rhetorick, except that we do not have words to help convey meaning (but then neither do we have the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that arise from those same words)?

Therefore, to hell with the barline, and the straightjackets imposed by a stultifing notation, and before you take a musical phrase, and blindly start to perform it believing that all is best disposed within a Cartesian grid of 4x4 squares, remember Macaulay; remember your rhetoric; remember how variable are the number of words per sentence; and remember how variable are the subphrases within those subsentences, and how rarely, if ever, equidistant and invariant thwacks actually give aid and succor to shape and meaning.

What can Macaulay teach us about musical phrasing?

[PZ only sketched how he would answer. He had planned to refer to:

* Material towards the end of Adam Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (ed. J. C. Bryce, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1985), a book that can be read by analogy to music.

* Schubert’s Great C Major Symphony, which can be heard by analogy to Macaulay’s prose:

> “Schubert's phrase lengths are quite astonishing. In some sense, I find them much harder to deal with then H(aydn). I have been dabbling on and off with the great C major, and it is just incomprehensible. I realize it has something to do with counting every two bar phrase as a single unit, but beyond that, I am lost.” (PZ email to Anton Vishio, Oct 31, 2014).

* Schoenberg’s writing about musical “sentences” in Beethoven (PZ’s comment: “ugh”):

> In its opening segment a theme must clearly present (in addition to tonality, tempo and metre) its basic motive. The continuation must meet the requirements of comprehensibility. An immediate repetition is the simplest solution, and is characteristic of the sentence structure. If the beginning is a two-measure phrase, the continuation (m. 3 and 4 [Beethoven op2/1]) may be either an unvaried or a transposed repetition. Slight changes in the melody or harmony may be made without obscuring the repetition. (Schoenberg, “Fundamentals of Music Composition”, ed. Gerald Strang, Faber & Faber, London, 1967)

Compare/contrast Schoenberg’s dictat on short-short-long to Adam Smith in Lecture 5:

> Let that which affects us most be placed first, that which affects us in the next degree next, and so on to the end.
>
> I will only give one other Rule with regard to the arrangement which is Subordinate indeed to this great one, and it is that your Sentence or Phrase never drag a Tail.
>
> To limit and qualify what you are about to affirm before you give the affirmation has the appearance of accurate and extensive views, but to qualify it afterwards seems a kind of Retractation

> and it bears the appearance of confusion or of disingenuity. (Smith, “Lectures on Rhetorick”)

PZ was also fascinated by Smith’s idea that language may evolve from inflected (as in Greek and Latin) to less inflected (as in English):

> It is in this manner that language becomes more simple in its rudiments and principles, just in proportion as it grows more complex in its composition, and the same thing has happened in it, which commonly happens with regard to mechanical engines. All machines are generally, when first invented, extremely complex in their principles, and there is often a particular principle of motion for every particular movement which it is intended they should perform. Succeeding improvers observe, that one principle may be so applied as to produce several of those movements; and thus the machine becomes gradually more and more simple, and produces its effects with fewer wheels, and fewer principles of motion. In language, in the same manner, every case of every noun, and every tense of every verb, was originally expressed by a particular distinct word, which served for this purpose and for no other. But succeeding observation discovered, that one set of words was capable of supplying the place of all that infinite number, and that four or five prepositions, and half a dozen auxiliary verbs, were capable of answering the end of all the declensions, and of all the conjugations in the ancient languages. But this simplification of languages, though it arises, perhaps, from similar causes, has by no means similar effects with the correspondent simplification of machines. The simplification of machines renders them more and more perfect, but this simplification of the rudiments of languages renders them more and more imperfect, and less proper for many of the purposes of language. (Smith, “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages”)

Which reminds of Schubert’s Great C Major making its long, complex

phrases out of simple components.

Beside the content and form of phrases is the issue of how to properly declaim them, e.g. the need for pauses after Macaulay's commas:

> Rhetoric is exactly what we are talking about, i.e. performances which only (indeed stupidly) pay attention to the exact written letter are meaningless; probably harmful… (PZ email to Yuji Takahashi on May 7, 2016).

- Craig Pepples, Aug 2017]

FOOTNOTES

1. From Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "William Pitt" and "The Earl of Chatham." Critical and Historical Essays, Vol. 1. (Accessed via blackmask/open library 20 August 2004 https://archive.org/stream/macaulaysmiscell00macarich?ref=ol#page/182/mode/2up
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2. Note from PZ to Dr Grumpy:

> Is not this next a marvelous bit of word painting, with the use (on purpose) of certain words, and interminable clauses, that almost collapse in this instance, but that collapse helps portray Chatham's decayed physical and mental state? Anyway, the point I wish to make here, is that there are times when you do not want to write a short sentence, or a short musical phrase, and if you come across something which appears to be (shall we say) 11 bars in length, and there is no clear point of musical-anatomical articulation, perhaps that is because the phrase is to be considered one unit, and in some fashion must be performed that

way, which of course begins with our understanding it in that manner, and understanding that it was conceived in that fashion.