

Mind the sound

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I

It may have been the year 1600 – on the dot – that a child was born in Iceland (probably) named Þorbjörn Þórðarson. Perhaps it was later though, it's hard to tell. No one really knows. And I wouldn't want to lie. You deserve the truth. And he may have smelled just as sweet born on any other date.

Þorbjörn grew up to be a poet of semi-renown, a blacksmith and a fisherman. Not much is known about the man or his life, even his identity and name being up for debate, but he is thought to have spent most of his years in the southern and western parts of Iceland. His poetry lived, as the poetry of many of his Icelandic contemporaries, mostly through an oral tradition of a nation with a fondness for rhymes – through collected folklore, and in part through myth. His early poetry is more or less forgotten, although it is said to have been rather plain - uneventful yet skillful, his art being occasional and his subject matter being (as was common) everyday life. Through an unusual act of divine intervention, this would all change.

One day Þorbjörn was minding his blacksmithing business in Skógarnes at Löngufjörur, Iceland, when a group of travellers approached, looking for a safe way to cross Haffjarðará-river. The travellers greeted Þorbjörn heartily, seeing as here they'd found a local man who could advise them on their journey through terrain that they knew very little of. Þorbjörn was by all accounts having a bad day. His blacksmithing was tiresome and not moving along with the expediency he would have wished. Perhaps he was, like many contemporary poets, fed up with his dayjob and wishing to have the time necessary to hone his poetic skills.

When the travellers asked where they should cross the river, he answered (as was poets wont in his time) with a poem. More precisely, a quatrain:

Though with hammer to iron I cater
'tis all for naught I slammer.
Take the course for Eldborg-crater,
and cross at Þóris-hammer.¹

This would all have been well and good, had the advice Þorbjörn gave to the travellers, in his mindless irritation toiling away with the iron, not been a bit inaccurate. Or to put it plainly (we do strive to make it simple): His advice was dead-wrong, erroneous, false, reprehensible and vicious – put it how you will: Þorbjörn sent the travellers towards an impassable part of the river, straight into the rapids of hell. The travellers however, being sufficiently naïve to believe a poet's pretty words, tried to cross where they were told. Needless to say, they all drowned.

Now in those years God was not the forgiving fellow we've come to admire in later years, and he did not at all enjoy having to receive the all-too early travellers

¹ Smátt vill ganga smíðið á
í smíðjunni þó ég glamri.
Þið skulið stefna Eldborg á,
undir Þórishamri.

(perhaps he wanted time to work on his poetry). So he smote Þorbjörn with a curse: He bereaved him of the 'gift of poetry'. But Þorbjörn, being of stubborn stock, wouldn't take no-poetry for an answer, and kept at it, poesying like a mad-man, quite literally: no matter how he toiled away at his quatrains and tercets, they all turned out nonsensical, full of words that weren't words, sentences that alluded meaning, leaning on nothing but the verse-framework:

*Loppu hroppu lyppu ver
lastra klastra styður,
Hoppu goppu hippu ver.
hann datt þarna niður.*²

Some of the words in the first three lines can be seen as having 'meaning', while some are 'meaningless' – the context is complete nonsense, beautiful nonsense, soundbouts in rounds galore – he is less literati than alliterati, or even illiterati – and yet it *sounds* like something a fisherman-blacksmith would write, it *sounds* like a fisherman-blacksmith's vocabulary, nevermindyou that the words don't mean anything – they SOUND.

The final line was all Þorbjörn had left of more traditional poetry, word-by-word: *he fell there down*. From the moment his curse became reality, more often than not, only Þorbjörn's last lines would be 'readable'. As his poetic career continued, Þorbjörn got to be known as 'Æri-Tobbi', Tobbi being a nickname for Þorbjörn and 'æri' meaning 'crazy' or 'insane' - and so he's known today.

Little did God know, on the day he smote his curse on Þorbjörn, that he'd be giving birth to Iceland's first avant-garde poet – a sound poet, no less, whose control of zaum is first-class, putting him in a category with such 20th century greats as F.T. Marinetti and Hugo Ball.

Æri-Tobbi was not the only poet in Iceland to be treated in this manner by the vengeful God, to whom the countrymen swore allegiance (although hesitantly, and merely in public) in the year 1000. Hallgrímur Pétursson, another 17th century poet and priest, was given a similar treatment for abusing his gift. At the time, the gift of poetry was seen as being magical, and poems would be written for magical purposes, be it to *poetry* the evil out of things, or to *poetry* a pretty girl/guy into bed. People would even fight with poetry, the most famous duel of all being that between Kolbeinn Jöklauskáld (yet another 17th century poet) and the Devil himself. Kolbeinn poetried the devil back to hell by rhyming the word 'tungl' (moon) – our 'orange' (unrhymable) – with 'ungl' or 'úln': a variation on the word for 'wrist' – this is all highly dubious, not really words and not even really rhymes, but the devil always being one to promote the avant-garde, readily agreed and cleared off to hell.

Hallgrímur had no such worthy opponent. He was having trouble with a fox who kept killing his sheep – a nasty biter, though no devil. One day, while in the pulpit, he saw the fox in question, and immediately proceeded to poetry it away, with such an astounding result that the fox literally sank into the ground (I'm not making this up!) God, being enraged at Hallgrímur for poetrying for secular matters

² Æri-Tobbi's poetry was collected in 1974 by Icelandic poet, Jón frá Pálmholti, in the book *Vísur Æra-Tobba* published by Íðunn. The collection consists of poetry thought to have been Æri-Tobbi's, from different manuscripts, a few in different versions. <http://libris.kb.se/bib/311850>

from the pulpit, dried up all the poet's poetry. It was not given back until Hallgrímur started his 25 thousand word anti-Semitic rant / psalm of passion, which counts among Icelandic Christianity's literary classics, having been published over 80 times (in a country currently of 320 thousand people)³.

As far as posterity goes, there's no remnants to be found about Hallgrímur ever having been a sound-poet or avant-gardist, despite his standing as one of our most respected poets. Quite the opposite.

He eventually caught leprosy and died.

II

While Æri-Tobbi was far from making any common-sense with his poetry, while he had totally lost his grip on words, sentences and their meanings, the verse-form remains, fully equipped with rhyme and the old Nordic rules of alliteration: 'props' & 'mainstuffs' - the anchors of poetry that even some modern Icelandic readers would openly claim was an unconditional requirement for any poem (worthy of the name). For a quatrain the most common form these rules take (there are variations) goes something like this: A pair of alliterations in the first and third line (props), and one at the beginning of the second and fourth line (mainstuffs). It's to be noted that all words in Icelandic have the stress on the first syllable, so that's where the alliteration goes (moreorless) without exception:

*Ambarar vambarar skrumburum sker
skrambra þumburinn dýri.
Vigra gíggra vambra hver
vagaði hann suður í mýri.*

The rules of props & mainstuffs are so intrinsic to the Icelanders' idea of poetry that when foreign verse-forms, like the sonnet, are imported they get a permanent injection of props & mainstuffs: A sonnet in Icelandic without props & mainstuffs is a rare exception – and this includes translations of foreign sonnets.

And the same evidently applies to 17th century sound-poetry in Icelandic. Although being a sound-poet freed from the burdens of meaning Æri-Tobbi could move more easily through in-rhymes, and would consistently over-alliterate (which was / is a semi-crime in Icelandic poetry), and repeat words or similar word-forms and thereby layer his sounds where he was unable to layer his meaning. This is not poetry meant to be taken sitting down:

*Aldan skjaldan galda grær
græfra ræfra russu.
Sæfra tæfra síldarmær
sussu sussu sussu.*

There's a consistent use of R's in various combinations in his zaum-words - the R in Icelandic being particularly rolled, the alveolar trill of [r] - a common blend being

³ *Hymns of the Passion* are available in English, translated by Arthur Charles Gook, <http://openlibrary.org/b/OL3060183M/Hymns-of-the-passion>.

'br's and 'fr's and 'vr's, with some notably difficult consonant-sequences like 'glr'. Where one of these sounds occur in a line, it's more than likely to reoccur, either in the same line or the next one. Some of this is a dire strain on the tongue:

*Aglra geglru guglra stögl
og geglra rambið.
Gaglra stiglu giglru strambið
gaf hún þér ekki stærra lambið?*

If living to be seen (read, enjoyed, enlightened) by posterity can be used as a measurement for the worth of poetry, the poetry of Æri-Tobbi is by far more excellent than that of Þorbjörn his predecessor. Its unique type of nonsense has kept it alive for over 400 years, because, quite frankly, it's inimitable, mad, linguistically destructive, fierce and beautiful.

III

Sound poetry is the art of treating all words (or phonemes) as if they were a peculiar form of *onomatopoeia* – that is, instead of treating words as if they imitated the sound they *describe*, you treat words (or phonemes) as if they imitated the sound they *make*.

An interesting and (perhaps) descriptive recent example of this is to be found in the poem '1,2,3' by Swedish poet Klas Mathiasson, from his book *urklippt*⁴ (trans. 'cutout')– the first three lines are written thusly:

BRA	BRA	BRA	BRA	BARA	BRA
BRA	BRA	BRA	BRA	BARA	BRA
BRA	BARA	BARA	BRA	BARA	BARA

'Bara' is Swedish for 'only' and 'bra' is Swedish for 'good'. The poem, magnificently read by the poet on a CD accompanying the book, becomes an incantation where one word melds into the other in a seemingly endless circle. Now, in Icelandic, 'bra' is literally onomatopoeic – being the sound ducks make – and in English its short for brassière (French for 'bra' I believe). 'Bara' is 'coffin' in Italian, and 'gregarious' in Latvian – in Japanese, 'bara' means 'rose', but it's also short for 'Barazouku', an influential gay magazine, according the online Urban Dictionary, as well as being a 'delicious gyanese food which can be eaten at special occasions' and slang for 'penis'.

Is it legume from a press, that makes me so digress? These so-called meanings will tell us nothing! Yet it recalls the dictionary-philic attitudes of some of the first sound-poets – the movement of Dada, who claimed their club-title could be made to mean anything from everything to nothing in the various languages of the world. And perhaps I'm not digressing at all.

⁴ *urklippt*, published by Pequod Press in Sweden,
<http://www.adlibris.com/se/product.aspx?isbn=9197729108>

Phonemes do not *mean*, they *sound*, and if I'm wrong and they in fact do *mean*, they only ever *mean what they sound*. It's the mechanism, I guess – I shouldn't apologize, this is how it might work:

- 1) Subject hears sound.
- 2) Subject interprets sound.
- 3) Sound doesn't exist in subjects innermost dictionaries.
- 4) Subject starts fabricating the evidence, eventually landing him or herself in poetry lock-up for fraud.

One of the aspects of sound-poetry, one of the facets that makes it such an international phenomena, is that its untranslatable weirdness is (more or less) equally untranslatable in any given language. Yes, Jaap Blonk's work sounds like Dutch, and Marinetti's work sounded like Italian – just like Æri-Tobbi's work sounded like Icelandic – but none of it is a 'correct' representative of the respective language. Yet it's not a given that the words chosen for a piece of sound-poetry don't correlate to an entry in the dictionary. Much of sound-poetry's oeuvre consists of actual words, and even grammatically correct sentences. And can even be found in many dictionaries, in different languages and cultures – simple one-syllable sounds (like 'bra' or 'da', 'bra bra' or 'dada') often exist in several languages and most sound poetry being merely strings of one-syllable sounds means that it *might* to some extent be interpretable by your brain through a 'close listening'. Hugo Ball's 'Gadji beri bimba' might be 'Gat í beri bimbult' ('Hole in berry nauseous', in Icelandic) or 'God Gee Berry Bimbo'.

All sound-poetry is to a great degree something that advertently/inadvertently becomes subject to an inner homophonic translation, because one's head interprets a spoken voice as language, and interprets language as being something that inherently has a meaning one can look up in a dictionary (I'm not saying it's a 'right' way of understanding sound poetry, I'm saying it's inevitably always part of the mix). This also goes for word-based or sentence-based sound-poetry because the weirdness incorporated into the sound tends to lead us as listeners astray, regarding their spelling or dictionary-meaning. So even words in sound-poetry that exist in dictionaries and are strung together into grammatically 'correct' sentences tend to get appropriated by sound-poetry and turned into 'pure' sound at some point, that can (and tends to) be reinterpreted back into 'traditional language' - and not always in the original meaning.

The categorical difference between sound-poetry and instrumental-music (including sound-poetry's cousin, scat-singing) is that the listener inevitably interprets what he or she hears as 'language' - not only is it the framework that the work is presented within, but it's also inherent to much of the actual work, that it actually 'resembles' language. It mimics language. So I theorize:

Zaum is to language as onomatopoeia is to an actual quack, an actual bark, etc.

IV

One of the aspects of Æri-Tobbi's sound-poetry is that it intersects its zaum with perfectly dictionariable words, and I'm told other words can be traced somewhere (go, etymology, go!) - but in any basic non-researching reading (let alone incanting) of his poetry you're not gonna be sure what *is a word* and what *is zaum*. It's not intentionally written as nonsense, at least that is not how the myth goes - it's an attempt at writing poetry by a poet bereaved of his gift. This, I interject, seems to imply that God is firmly on one side of the content vs. form debate - as he did not choose to bereave Æri-Tobbi of the gift of form, but only his meaning-content (again, in the dictionary sense of meaning (no, not 'meaning' as the word's described in the dictionary, but the way a dictionary conveys meaning)).

And so, once in a while, a sunbeam gets through, a single word or even a sentence:

*Imbrum bimbrum ambrum bambrum apin dæla
skaufra raufra skapin skæla
skrattinn má þeim dönsku hæla.*

The tercets closing line means something like: *The devil can praise the Danish*. What of the rest of it? 'Dæla' is *pump*, 'skæla' is *whine* - but without the help of a dictionary the rest of it eludes me, and the endings (conjugations?) are unusual, in the sense that they are repetitive, which in Indo-European languages is more an exception than a rule - especially a 4X repetition, as in *Imbrum bimbrum ambrum bambrum*.

Portions of other words can be 'translated'. Thus 'imbrum' might refer to 'imbra', the fast that begins every quarter of the Catholic church year; the only word starting with 'bimb' I can find, is 'bimbult', *nauseous*; 'ambrum' might refer to 'ambra' which is (amongst other things) the *wailing of a child*. 'Bambrum' could be from 'bambra', to *drink fast* or *swig*. 'Apin' might be a form of 'api', a *monkey*, or 'opin', that is to say: *open*. 'Skaufra' might be 'skauf' - the *foreskin* of a horse's penis. 'Raufra' might be 'rauf', an *opening*. 'Skapin' might be 'skapaður' or 'sköp' - *created* or *female reproductive system* (more commonly: her genitalia) or even *destiny*.

Most of these words that I've linked to the word-forms in the poem through etymological guesswork are very uncommon.

An attempt at a translation (sans form, plus more guesswork) might look like this:

During the catholic fast,
we felt nauseous
from the wailing of children
and swigging from the open pump.

The foreskin of a horse's penis
made the cunt's opening whine.

The Devil can praise the Danish.

Now, we might have different opinions on whether this makes any more sense than the original, but at least these are sentences - not even the most arid critic would disagree with that. But those looking for more finality of meaning, might want to distance themselves even further from Æri-Tobbi's sound-poem, interpreting the interpretation - *The poem discusses sins of the flesh and juxtaposes animal(istic) intercourse, crying infants and barbaric drinking habits with the strict mediaeval Catholic church (abandoned in Iceland, for Lutheranism, in 1550). The final line could be read as an indictment of the Danish colonial-lords of Iceland, either saying that they're on the devil's side (literally) or more colloquially saying something along the lines of "who cares about the Danish". To be noted: When the Protestant reformation occurred all the property of the Catholic church was appropriated by the Danish king, and he replaced the pope as head of the church, becoming more influential and eventually subjecting Icelanders to a commerce-monopoly where all imports had to be from (or through) Denmark.*

We would not dare such interpretations, would not bother (the devil can praise these interpretations!) for we are only interested in the sounds. And then again, while phonemes *sound* more than they mean, the sounds tend to inadvertently *mean* while *sounding*.

V

My own relationship with Æri-Tobbi stems from my childhood - I don't remember where or when, but I remember being enthralled and giddy about his poetry. It wasn't particularly hard to recognize or play with (in the sense of *reading*, like *writing*, being a game) because I found in it something that reminded me of Þórarinn Eldjárn's (1949-) children's poetry (and reminiscence is nine-tenths of the discovery). Eldjárn's poetry is often nonsensical, a distortion of sayings and colloquialisms, double-entendres and the like. It's playful in a way I wish all poetry was playful. And in Eldjárn's recent poetry book from 2001, *Grannmeti og átvextir*⁵ (*Edible neighbours and eating-interests*, perhaps - a wordplay on *Grænmeti og ávextir* - Vegetables and fruit) he includes a poem called 'Takk takk Tobbi' ('Thanks thanks Tobbi') that consists of some of Æri-Tobbi's most famous zaums and stream-lined variations of them. While the poem is infinitely more 'understandable' than any of Æri-Tobbi's work, it somehow shows more clearly the connection between these two poets - the 17th century madman, and the 20th century children's poet - than any of Eldjárn's previous work. Or perhaps more precisely, it underlines that which was always there: The joy of (the sounds of) words shared by the two men. And for me personally, it came with the vainglorious feeling of having been right all along (yay!), iterated in the last two lines:

*Þambara vambara, Þorbjörn minn
þakka þér fyrir arfinn þinn.*

*(Þambara vambara, my dear Þorbjörn
thank you for the inheritance)*

⁵ *Grannmeti og átvextir*, published by Vaka-Helgafell, 2001,
http://skolavefurinn.is/lok/almennt/ljodskald_man/Torarinna_Eldjarn/Grannmeti_og_atvextir_9.htm

In early 2008 I wrote the poem 'Úr órum Tobba', (trans. 'From the madness of Tobbi') a six-to-seven minute long sound-poem carved from Æri-Tobbi's zaum⁶. The poem was first performed at the Scream Poetry Festival in Toronto, at the Lexiconjury Revival Night, and has in fact not been performed since⁷ (although published on CD, along with more of my sound-poems⁸).

'Úr órum Tobba' is at once a found poem and sound poem, collaged and cut-up lines of zaum taken from the quatrains, tercets and couplets of Æri-Tobbi - the first of the thirteen stanzas is written thus:

*Axar sax og lævarar lax
Axar sax og lævarar lax
Hoppara boppara hoppara boppara
stagara jagara stagara jagara
Neglings steglings veglings steglings
Skögula gögula ögula skögula
hræfra flotið humra skotið
Axar sax og lævarar lax*

Each stanza has eight lines, and all are intersected with two of Æri-Tobbi's most famous zaum-lines:

*Agara gagara agara gagara
vambara þambara vambara þambara*

The eight-line stanza recalls for me the ballade, yet the exclusion of Æri-Tobbi's more straight-forward lines (leaving only the zaum) brings a darker element into the mix, and the stanza-length brings with it more momentum than is to be found in Æri-Tobbi's much shorter poems, and increases the iniquitous nature (sound) of the work. It is indeed still playful, but the game may have turned a bit sinister.

The handling is in some ways opposite to the handling of Eldjárn mentioned earlier. While Eldjárn keeps Æri-Tobbi's signature zaum, he funnels it into more literally understandable stanzas - underlining the light nature of the original poems. My own version of 13 eight-line stanzas where little to no 'sense' can be made, becomes more of a dark matter, more of a druidic incantation, and I feel myself stressing the sounds quite differently than I would stress the original - at times moving them back in the throat for a guttural approach. I should mention that these decisions, and I'm not fully comfortable with calling them decisions, were something that came quite naturally through the process of piecing the found-sound-poem

⁶ A video of the poem performed can be found on my homepage: <http://www.norddahl.org/english> - under 'Readings'.

⁷ Since the writing of this essay, I've performed it once more, at Stanza litteraturbar in Malmö, 26th of March, 2009. The video of that performance is also on my homepage.

⁸ The book and CD, *Ú á fasismann (A boo against fascism)* published by Mál og menning, 2008, available here: <http://www.boksala.is/EN/DesktopDefault.aspx/tabid-8/prodid-48630/>. The recording on the CD is a different one from the one featured here.

together. I would have guessed beforehand (and I think I did) that the poem would turn out much more 'pleasant' than it eventually did.

'Úr órum Tobba' is the only sound-poem I've done that's made from zaum - the rest mostly consisting of grammatically 'correct' sentences. I guess it's some sort of ode to the old man, and perhaps also to Þórarinn Eldjárn in part, and it may say more about my own interest in reading, writing and sounding than it *pleases* the audience (although, vainglorious as I am, I should mention that its only performance was received very warmly) or than it says anything in particular about Æri-Tobbi (let alone Þórarinn Eldjárn). For a love-song it's pretty dark, I can't imagine anyone wanting a love-song like this:

*Viggjara þöggara vúgrar brúgrar
frugrar skrugrar frá því skreytti
Vampara stampara vumparar bumpara
frumbara þumbara fjandans lómur
ára díks á priksum, krunkum
nagla stúss og nafra púss
klastra stir og kjóla ruð
hellirs dagra hallar suð*

But then again, we don't get to choose who loves us, or even how.